

A Teacher's Guide to Introducing the Short Story to Homiletics Students

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Abstract: *Fred Craddock in his textbook *Preaching* advised homiletics students to read a short story a week to help them become engaging preachers. He said that by taking the initiative to do so, students would relieve their professor of the contradiction of having to assign such reading. However, since most students will not read short stories on their own, teachers of preaching need to advocate and make room for them in their homiletics courses. Short stories offer instruction in unity, brevity, open-endedness, vocabulary, and difficulty. Also, short story collections can inspire one to preach a sermon series. This article discusses these short story traits and how teachers of preaching can introduce short stories to their students.*

Introduction

In his textbook *Preaching*, Fred Craddock encouraged homiletics students to read at least one short story a week to help them become better sermon designers. He said, "Since the short story is a first cousin of the sermon, the homiletics student could, for example, relieve the professor of the contradiction of having to assign such reading by taking the initiative to read at least one per week."¹ Even though Craddock addressed his comments to students of homiletics, he believed preachers could also benefit from reading short stories because he also said, "The ideal would be to begin in seminary the habit of reading such literature along with one's assignments in history, theology, and biblical studies, and then to maintain the practice through one's ministry."² Why such reading? Craddock expounded:

Reading good literature enlarges one's capacities as a creative human being and has a cumulative effect on one's vocabulary, use of the language, and powers of imagination. Not by conscious imitation but through the subtle influence of these great storytellers and poets, a preacher becomes more adept at arranging the materials of the sermon so that by restraint and thematic control, interest, clarity, and persuasiveness will be served.³

Still, despite these benefits from reading short stories, do not expect students to head to the library to check out books of short stories. Western culture is geared toward reading novels. Even when I talk with preachers about the benefits of reading short stories, most will say they still prefer novels to stories. Why is this? John Beevers, a retired tutor of creative writing at Lancaster University in England, offers this insight:

It may be that the short story is sidelined in the teaching of English in schools. It may simply be that reading in general, as entertainment, has to compete with computer games, TV and film, and that reading requires more effort. Furthermore, modern short stories are at the difficult end of the reading spectrum. The view that the present reading population is orientated towards easy reading is supported by the best-selling fiction lists. The lurid

¹ Fred Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 79.

² Craddock, *Preaching*, 79.

³ Craddock, *Preaching*, 79.

and undemanding novel accounts for the majority of sales, so it is not surprising that the demanding modern short story accounts for so few.⁴

Moreover, Beevers says that readers incline toward novels because they become more emotionally invested in them than in short stories because short stories are over before you know it. He says that if there is to be a turnaround with readers taking up the short story as much as they do the novel, then it will take schools inculcating within students a love for the short story.⁵ According to Beevers, “Developing a population with a love of fine literature would be a long term matter. It would probably need to be developed in schools.”⁶ Hence, while I agree with Craddock that reading short stories is a beneficial practice, I disagree with him that homiletics students are going to take up reading short stories on their own. If students are to take up reading short stories, it will mean teachers of preaching will need to introduce the short story to them and help them get started. What follows then are reasons for reading short stories and ways to get students started.

Two Clarifications

Before I go further, however, I would like to clarify two things.

First, when I say that homiletics students should be reading short stories, it is not for the purpose of finding sermon illustrations. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with this. If one wishes to pursue this avenue, Mike Graves has written a wonderful book called *The Story of Narrative Preaching*, in which he pairs short stories with biblical passages to highlight biblical themes.⁷ The book helps in that regard. Nor am I proposing the reading of short stories so that every preacher becomes a storyteller. Not all preachers are meant to be storytellers. Rather, I am proposing homiletics students read short stories so they become adept at forming sermons, whatever their style may be. As Craddock says, by reading short stories, preachers will become versed in restraint and thematic control. They will have greater facility in creating sermons that are clear, interesting, and persuasive. While reading short stories is not meant to turn everyone into a storyteller, I do believe they influence preachers to preach narratively or inductively. By narrative, I mean preaching sermons that move from conflict to resolution, though not necessarily in the form of a story. Eugene Lowry’s Homiletical Loop is a good example of narrative preaching.⁸ By inductive, I mean preaching that moves from particulars to a conclusion. L. Susan Bond’s sermon “Coming Home” in *Patterns of Preaching* is a good example of inductive preaching.⁹ Reading short stories also influences preachers to preach sermons from a literary perspective, in which preachers notice an aspect of the biblical text such as rhetoric or gaps to form the basis of their sermons.¹⁰ Still, Craddock says it is “not by conscious imitation

⁴ John Beevers, “The Short Story: What Is It Exactly, What Do We Want to Do with It, and How Do We Intend to Do It?” in *The Short Story*, ed. Ailsa Cox (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 22.

⁵ Beevers, “The Short Story,” 23-24.

⁶ Beevers, “The Short Story,” 24.

⁷ Mike Graves, *The Story of Narrative Preaching: Experience and Exposition: A Narrative*. (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 3-6, 120-25.

⁸ See Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, expanded ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), “Plot Forms.”

⁹ L. Susan Bond, “Coming Home: Isaiah 60:1-6,” in *Patterns of Preaching: Sermon Sampler*, ed. Ronald J. Allen (St. Louis: Chalice, 1998), 65-70.

¹⁰ Robert Kysar and Joseph M. Webb, *Preaching to Postmoderns: New Perspectives for Proclaiming the Message* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 87-96.

but through the subtle influence of these great storytellers” that one becomes more adept at preaching. Measuring that influence is hard, but I believe it is to be had.

Second, teachers of preaching can insert instruction in short stories in any homiletics course, but the ideal would be to insert such instruction in an introductory course to help students break out of trite ways of preaching. Alyce McKenzie writes:

As a teacher of preachers, I notice that some things never seem to change. In introductory preaching classes, the assignment for students to preach their first sermons functions like a tap to the knee with a doctor’s mallet. Many students still reflexively preach a three-point sermon of concepts boiled down from a historical-critical approach to the text, or a two-part background-application sermon based on the same exegetical approach.¹¹

McKenzie implies these sermons are lifeless. Reading short stories, then, inspires students to preach creatively. Nevertheless, the topic of short stories could be revisited in subsequent homiletics courses to encourage their continued reading. As noted earlier, according to Craddock, “The ideal would be to begin in seminary the habit of reading such literature along with one’s assignments in history, theology, and biblical studies, and then to maintain the practice through one’s ministry.”¹² Reading short stories is like vocal warmups: it is not something meant to be done once and for all but something meant to be done repeatedly to prepare for the more serious task at hand.

Figure 1 is an excerpt from an introductory preaching course syllabus, showing how teachers of preaching could introduce short stories at that level. I introduce short stories during the fourth week of the course to allow for more preliminary matters to take place in the preceding weeks like introductions, course orientation, and a discussion of theologies of preaching. Still, if teachers of preaching wanted to introduce short stories sooner, that would be fine. Introducing short stories later in the course would be all right too, although the greater the passage of time, the lesser the influence short stories will have on students’ preaching.

Returning to figure 1, I introduce short stories during that part of the course which considers study and prayer in the life of the preacher. Reading short stories would form a part of the preacher’s life of study. Before introducing short stories, it would help to have students read chapter four of Craddock’s *Preaching*, which espouses the idea of reading short stories to help one’s preaching. This would be followed by the actual introduction of short stories, which I will discuss later in this essay in the section called, “A Teacher’s Guide to Introducing the Short Story to Homiletics Students.” Finally, students would read one or more short stories outside of class and then discuss them in class before being encouraged by the teacher to continue the practice in one of several ways. These ways will also be discussed in “A Teacher’s Guide to Introducing the Short Story to Homiletic Students.” In subsequent preaching courses, teachers could judge for themselves how to best introduce or revisit the topic of short stories.

¹¹ Alyce M. McKenzie, “At the Intersection of *Actio Divina* and *Homo Performans*: Embodiment and Evocation,” in *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*, ed. Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), chap. 3.

¹² Craddock, *Preaching*, 79.

III. STUDY AND PRAYER IN THE PREACHER'S LIFE		
Week 4	13-Feb	Discussion of Craddock's <i>Preaching</i> , chapter four Discussion of Alcántara's <i>The Practices of Christian Preaching</i> , chapter two
	15-Feb	Introduction to the Short Story Read James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" in Charters's <i>The Story and Its Writer</i> , pp. 105-33
Week 5	20-Feb	Discussion of Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues"

Figure 1. Excerpt from an introductory preaching course syllabus showing the introduction of short stories¹³

Reasons for Reading Short Stories

Let us then consider reasons for reading short stories.

Unity

One reason for reading short stories is to learn unity. Edgar Allan Poe was the first to say that short stories (called "tales" in the nineteenth century) possessed unity because authors chose a single technique to employ within their tales to achieve a certain effect within readers.¹⁴ For example, that single technique could be suspense whereby readers become frightened or it could be repetition whereby readers become impressed with an idea. Other literary critics after Poe agreed with him that a trait of short stories is "singleness" but did not limit singleness to technique. They said that singleness could arise from a single emotion, a single crisis, or a single character.¹⁵ It is this "singleness" that gives rise to unity, which in turn creates interest. Unity is also an essential feature within preaching. Sermons that have a clear focus help congregations to stay tuned in and to remember the message. Sermons lacking a clear focus task the congregation with trying to discern what the preacher is saying. If they are tasked long enough, they will simply give up and stop listening. If they continue listening, the message they take away may be different from the one intended. Tom Long developed focus and function statements to help preachers stay on track when preaching.¹⁶ Reading short stories will also influence preachers to stay on track.

Brevity

Another reason for reading short stories is their brevity. Short stories can range anywhere from Ernest Hemingway's six-word story "Baby boots for sale: never worn" to upwards of twenty

¹³ Craddock, *Preaching*, 69-83; Jared E. Alcántara, *The Practices of Christian Preaching: Essentials for Effective Proclamation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 41-71; James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues [1957]," in *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*, 10th ed., ed. Ann Charters (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2019), 105-33. I will discuss Ann Charters's *The Story and Its Writer* later in this essay.

¹⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, 1809-1849, "Nathaniel Hawthorne: *Twice-Told Tales* [May 1842]," in *Essays and Reviews* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), 572.

¹⁵ Brander Matthews, "The Philosophy of the Short-Story," in *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. Charles E. May (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994), 73; Mary Louise Pratt, "The Short Story: The Long and Short of It," *Poetics: Journal of Empirical Research on Culture, the Media, and the Arts* 10, no. 2-3 (June 1981): 182, 184.

¹⁶ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 127.

thousand words, with seven thousand words being the average length.¹⁷ Still, brevity is more often defined in terms of a story getting to the point. Whereas novels can afford to take “detours,” stories must stay on course if there is to be a story within a short space. Also, since stories must say a lot in a short space, they must economize on language, making every word count. Says Charles May, emeritus professor of English at California State University, Long Beach: “The kind of complexity that fascinates masters of the short story is not captured by using more and more words but by using just the right ones.”¹⁸

Sermons should also be brief. Listening requires a great deal of energy. Thus, people can burn out quickly from listening especially if the subject matter is of no interest to them or the speaker is talking aimlessly. Hence, brevity within sermons is about staying on message. Since people are expending energy to listen, sermons that lack a clear focus or are unnecessarily repetitive quickly exhaust the congregation and leave them wishing the preacher would just stop preaching. Reading short stories can train preachers to stay on message and get the sermon said in a short time.

Open-endedness

Another reason for reading short stories is that they are often open-ended and lack a definitive conclusion. Rather, they leave it to the reader to guess what happened next. They either end at the story’s climax or shortly thereafter. This contrasts with novels, which often have lengthy endings that tie up all the loose ends. Instead, stories are philosophic: they make a statement about the truth, and once they have done that, they are over. They leave it to the reader to apply the truth.¹⁹

Preachers would also do well to imitate the open-endedness of short stories. Rather than pin everything down for their listeners, preachers would do well to leave some of their sermons open-ended with listeners drawing their own conclusions. Theologian Paul Lakeland says,

Fiction can be enormously helpful in ... the rehabilitation of the wounded imaginations of our present day. The incapacity to grasp any sense of transcendence is simply a failure of imagination, one that has all but emptied the churches and that goes a long way toward explaining the anomie of our world. The churches have opted for moralizing in the guise of

¹⁷ Tania Hershman, “The Shorter End of Short Stories—Boundaries with Poetry,” in *Writing Short Stories: A Writers’ and Artists’ Companion*, ed. Courttia Newland and Tania Hershman (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 41; Romesh Gunsekera, “The Art of the Short Story: A Risky Business,” *Wasafiri: The Magazine of International Contemporary Writing*, March 2016, 6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2016.1112556>; Ian Reid, *The Short Story* (London: Routledge, 1977), 9.

¹⁸ Charles E. May, “Why Teaching the Short Story Today is a Thankless Task,” in *Teaching the Short Story*, ed. Ailsa Cox (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 157.

¹⁹ Jenn Ashworth, “On Being Brief,” in Newland and Hershman, 87-88; Flannery O’Connor, “Writing Short Stories,” in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969); Edith Pearlman, “On Short Stories,” in Newland and Hershman, 107; Olive Senior, “The Short Story,” in Newland and Hershman, 113; Rust Hills, *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular: An Informal Textbook*, rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 106-7; Valerie Trueblood, “What’s the Story? Aspects of the Form,” *American Poetry Review* 30, no. 4 (July-August 2001): 41; Mary Rohrberger, “Where Do We Go from Here? The Future of the Short Story,” in *The Tales We Tell: Perspectives on the Short Story*, ed. Barbara Lounsberry, Susan Lohafer, Mary Rohrberger, Stephen Pett, and R. C. Feddersen (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998), 205.

preaching, paying less and less attention to the celebration of mystery in the liturgy and the urgency to heal the pain of the world that is incumbent upon the eucharistic community.²⁰

Craddock would agree:

She who preaches inductively will need to be prepared for frequent comments from the congregation to the effect that her sermons seem to be long introductions with a point stated or implied at the end.... She may ... detect that for which she had hoped: The congregation cannot shake off the finished sermon by shaking the minister's hand. The sermon, not finished yet, lingers beyond the benediction, with conclusions to be reached, decisions made, actions taken, and brothers sought while gifts lie waiting at the altar. Those who had ears heard, and what they heard was the Word of God.²¹

Open-ended sermons are especially good when preaching parables since parables themselves are open-ended. It is the open-endedness of sermons that provokes further thought and makes them memorable.²² Short stories then can teach preachers how to preach open-endedly.

Short Story Collections

Another reason for reading short stories is they are sometimes published as collections based on things like place, ethnicity, or subject. For example, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, and James Joyce's *Dubliners* are collections of short stories based on place. Edward Jones's *Lost in the City* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* are collections of short stories based on ethnicity—African Americans and Bengalis and Bengali Americans, respectively. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and W. P. Kinsella's *The Further Adventures of Slugger McBatt* are collections of short stories based on subject. O'Brien's collection is based on the Vietnam War and Kinsella's collection is based on baseball. The nice thing about short story collections is that they are a fusion of the short story and novel genres. They give the quick satisfaction of a short story and the sustained reflection of a novel. Each story is independent and yet the stories may interrelate by employing some of the same characters or some of the same themes.²³

Reading short story collections can inspire preachers to preach a sermon series. Sermon series are sermons delivered in sequence and based on things like a book of the Bible, a liturgical season, or a subject. For example, a sermon series could be given on the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans, on Lent, or on prayer. The options are practically limitless on which a sermon series could be given. The nice thing about a sermon series is that each sermon is self-contained, that is,

²⁰ Paul Lakeland, *The Wounded Angel: Fiction and the Religious Imagination* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2017), chap. 3, "So What About the Imagination?"

²¹ Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 125.

²² Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 3; Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx*, ed. Ted Mark Schoof, Carl Sterkens, Erik Borgman, and Robert J. Schreiter, vol. 6, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 146-47; Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2019), 34.

²³ Sherwood Anderson, 1876-1941, *Winesburg, Ohio* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996); Joyce, James, 1882-1941, *Dubliners* (New York: Modern Library, 1993); Edward P. Jones, *Lost in the City: Stories* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993); Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* (London: HarperCollins, 2000); Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried: A Work of Fiction* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009); W. P. Kinsella, *The Further Adventures of Slugger McBatt: Baseball Stories* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988); Beevers, "The Short Story," 25.

able to be understood and appreciated in and of itself, while the series provides an in-depth view of the subject.²⁴ I have found sermon series a satisfying way to preach. With the congregation, I learn about a biblical book or a topic like covenants. Again, reading short story collections could inspire preachers to preach a sermon series.

Difficulty

Still, another reason for reading short stories is to become aware of how difficult it is to come up with an engaging story. Even famous writers can write a riveting story only to follow it with one that falls flat. Or they may write several stories that end up being rejected before having one that is finally published. Still, once they have published a story it does not mean that every story thereafter will be a success. Irish short-story writer and critic Sean O’Faolain posted as the epigraph to his book *The Short Story* this quote from Gustave Flaubert: “One is not at all free to write this or that. One does not choose one’s subject. That is what the public and the critics do not understand. The secret of masterpieces lies in the concordance between the subject and the temperament of the author.”²⁵ Masterpieces, then, are not something that can be produced through skill alone. As Flaubert points out and as O’Faolain agrees, masterpieces happen when there is a convergence between the subject matter and the author’s mood. Those convergences can be far and few between. In the meantime, writers must continue writing in the hope of happening upon that convergence.

If masterpieces in writing short stories happen only when there is a convergence between subject and author, how much less are they likely to occur in preaching? Far less in my opinion.

Preachers often do not have free reign in choosing the scriptures on which they will preach, especially if they belong to a tradition that uses a lectionary. Nor do they often get to choose the occasion on which they will preach. If they are a regular minister at a church, they may have to preach Sunday after Sunday. It can be hard to preach a masterpiece that often. Also, preachers often do not get to choose to whom they will preach. If they are called on to preach at a funeral, they must preach even though they may have scant knowledge of the deceased and the mourners. These circumstances, therefore, reveal the difficulty of preaching inspiring sermons. As Harry Emerson Fosdick once put it: “Preaching is like standing on the edge of the roof of a ten-story building with an eyedropper, trying to aim the medicine so that it lands in the eye of one who needs it below!”²⁶ Nevertheless, preaching must go on “whether the time is favorable or unfavorable” (2 Tim 4:2), whether there is a masterpiece or no masterpiece. Reading short stories, therefore, can console preachers by showing them how equally hard it is for writers to produce an engaging short story.

²⁴ Ronald J. Allen, “Lectio Continua,” and Michael Duduit, “Sermon Series,” in *The New Interpreter’s Handbook of Preaching*, ed. Paul Scott Wilson (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008); Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 80.

²⁵ Gustave Flaubert, epigraph to *The Short Story*, by Sean O’Faolain (Cork: Mercier, 1972). The original quote can be found in Gustave Flaubert, 1821-1880, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert 1857-1880* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 20. It reads:

A good subject for a novel is one that comes all at once, in a single spurt. It is a matrix idea, from which all the others derive. An author is not at all free to write this or that. He does not choose his subject. That is what the public and the critics do not understand. Therein lies the secret of masterpieces—in the concordance of the subject and the author’s temperament.

Still, I quote Flaubert as quoted by O’Faolain to show that though Flaubert is speaking about the writing of novels, O’Faolain believes his quote equally applies to short stories.

²⁶ Jean Halligan Vandergrift, “Let It Fall on Me: Isaiah 55:10-13 & Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23,” *Journal of Family Ministry* 19, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 46, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost.

Vocabulary

A sixth reason for reading short stories is for the sake of enhancing vocabulary. Short stories are made up of concrete words. Seldom does one find abstract words within them. Concrete words make it easy to imagine what the author is saying. Images create interest because one can visualize what the author is talking about. On the other hand, abstract words make it difficult for the reader to ascertain the author's meaning. They also make it difficult to create images in one's mind. This difficulty can set one adrift to think about other things while the author is speaking. Assuredly, concrete words make up the bulk of poetry and novels, also. But if one is already reading short stories, the benefit of the authors' use of vocabulary is evident there as well. Likewise, preaching bodes well when preachers use concrete words. The congregation can follow the sermon more easily, which in turn means they are more likely to stay tuned-in. Seldom do the four gospels portray Jesus using abstract language while preaching. Righteousness, salvation, and Paraclete may be the only abstract words used by Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels. Otherwise, Jesus's preaching is replete with words like sheep, goats, vines, branches, stewards, and virgins. These were the type of words that drew me in when I was a boy going to Mass with my family. While so much of the Mass was lost on me because I could not understand it, the Gospel reading often drew me in because I could understand it. The stories and the images drew me in. It is no surprise, then, that David Buttrick advised preachers to avoid abstract words like "soteriology" and "kerygma" in favor of concrete words that could be easily visualized.²⁷ Likewise, Kathleen Norris in her book *Amazing Grace* says so much of Christian language loses her. She even confesses having trouble understanding what the word "Christ" means. Instead, her book attempts to define and describe abstract words such as "eschatology" and "righteous" with real life examples to help readers better understand them.²⁸ Again, reading short stories will help preachers speak of inaccessible things in more accessible ways.

A Teacher's Guide to Introducing the Short Story to Homiletics Students

Having considered several reasons for reading short stories, let us turn to how teachers of preaching can introduce short stories to their students.

Getting Started

As teachers of preaching invite students of homiletics to take up reading short stories, they can do several things to facilitate the process.

Teachers may suggest that students begin reading one or more short stories a week using the latest edition of *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*, which is an anthology of short stories edited by Ann Charters. At the time of this article, the anthology is in its tenth edition.²⁹ Charters is professor emerita of American literature at the University of Connecticut at Storrs. She spent her career compiling a reader of short stories that spans from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. The tenth edition comprises one hundred twelve stories along with fifty commentaries, six case studies, and six appendices. The appendices guide students in reading short stories and define commonly-used terms in discussing and writing about fiction.

²⁷ David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), "13. Style and Preaching," "Some General Guidelines"; "12. The Language of Preaching," "The Vocabulary of Preaching."

²⁸ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead, 1998), 2, 6-8, 11-13, 96-97.

²⁹ Ann Charters, ed., *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*, 10th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2019).

The book is a treasure. It is the kind of literature that Craddock recommended that homiletics students read; namely, literature that “has stood the test of time and remains on the list of recommended reading in literature classes.”³⁰

Teachers of preaching can also inform students that most short stories lack a fast-moving plot. Often plot is “subordinated to elements such as character, theme, or atmosphere.”³¹ Or the plot may advance by suggestion rather than through clearly-stated actions. Experts of the short-story form advise beginning short-story writers to concentrate on characterization rather than plot when writing. The focus on characterization may not produce a story that is as riveting as an action-packed story. On the other hand, such a story will usually have greater substance and ring truer to life than one in which the writer has focused on plot. In any event, Craddock said that the purpose of reading short stories was mainly for study, not pleasure.³²

Teachers of preaching can also help students understand that short stories are a dense form of writing. They share a closer kinship with poetry than with novels. This density often results in stories being open-ended and metaphorical.³³ It also means stories will often be difficult to understand. Recognition of this difficulty will not increase the enjoyment of reading but it may give students the perseverance to continue when they might otherwise give up. As they continue, they may find greater facility in understanding subsequent stories.

Teachers of preaching should also inform students that some if not many of the stories they read may offend them due to language, situation, or both. An example is Flannery O'Connor's “The Artificial Nigger,” whose title alone is offensive. In such cases, teachers of preaching need to carefully inform their students of the historical context within which such stories were written and direct them to the substantive content of what they are reading while warning them of the dangers of perpetuating offensive terms and stereotypes from the pulpit. As for the brevity of short stories, teachers can inform students that they are learning how to say profound things briefly yet in a way that captivates people and urges them to think.³⁴ When students resist such lessons, teachers of preaching can offer their students this insight from May:

Some ... nowadays have nothing but scorn for what they term ‘the so-called aesthetic’, insisting that the proper aim of literary education is righting old wrongs. For them, literature is not the mysterious exploration of the complexity that makes us human; it is sociology; it is limited by history; it is Eurocentric, phallogentric and logocentric. Originality is mere self-indulgence. Exploration of the self is narcissism ...

I can only hope that the current trend is a fad that will pass – merely a reflection of those who are bored or baffled by literature and who wish to tame it by limiting it to historical moments or social movements. After 45 years of passion for reading and teaching, I still believe that true

³⁰ Craddock, *Preaching*, 78.

³¹ A. L. Bader, “The Structure of the Modern Short Story,” *College English* 7, no. 2 (November 1945): 87, <https://doi.org/10.2307/371089>.

³² Bader, “The Structure of the Modern Short Story,” 87-92; Kenneth Payson Kempton, *The Short Story* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1947), 231-38; O'Connor, “Writing Short Stories”; Craddock, *Preaching*, 78.

³³ Grace Paley, “A Conversation with Ann Charters [1986],” in Charters, 1368; Charles E. May, “Why Short Stories are Essential and Why They Are Seldom Read” in *The Art of Brevity: Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis*, ed. Per Winther, Jakob Lothe, and Hans H. Skei (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 14-25.

³⁴ Flannery O'Connor, “The Artificial Nigger,” in *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971), 249-270; May, “Why Teaching the Short Story Today is a Thankless Task,” 147-52, 156-58.

literature – those works that we come back to again and again because, in their beauty and complexity, they refuse to become part of our disposable society – will continue to challenge us in spite of all efforts to tame it or toss it into the dustbin of literary history.³⁵

Recent Collections

Ann Charters's *The Story and Its Writer* is by far the best available primer for adults who are new to the genre of short fiction. Many of the stories are engaging and time-tested. But what happens after one finishes reading *The Story and Its Writer*? What does one read next? One could locate and read more stories from favorite authors found in *The Story and Its Writer*. One could also search for more short stories using the subject heading "Short Stories" in a library catalog. Still, if one finds the stories in *The Story and Its Writer* too stilted or if one is looking for short stories in a more contemporary idiom, one could choose to read one or more of several annually published collections of short stories such as *The Best American Short Stories*, *The Best American Mystery and Suspense*, *The Best Short Stories: The O. Henry Prize Winners*, and *Coolest American Stories*.³⁶ The problem is that these stories tend to be more of the "thrill stuff that depends on a murder and a rape on each page to sustain the reader's attention," which Craddock deplored.³⁷ Also, it is not uncommon for these collections to make use of profanities which some people may find off-putting. At a time when many schools, faculty, and libraries are debating which materials are to be made available to students, it is important for teachers of preaching to assist their students in determining which story collections are of greatest benefit and how to assess their relative merits.

Audiobooks

Another way to get students to read is by getting them to listen to recordings of written materials. An English professor once told me that if I was short on time to read, to listen to an audiobook of the work if one was available. Listening can happen practically anywhere, anytime—while one is driving, eating, cleaning, walking, and so on. Craddock himself says, "The practice is not study in the heavy-browed, note-taking sense, but if the person whose primary business is communicating [namely, the preacher] spends time each day with someone who has proven skills at that very point, it qualifies."³⁸ In other words, the purpose of reading short stories is to get them in one's head to influence one's preaching. If one cannot find the time to read short stories, then listening to them works equally well.

Types of Short Stories

It also helps if one knows which kinds of short stories one likes. There are not just short stories; there are different types of short stories. Knowing which type or types one likes could direct one in the direction of more of those types. While it is good to read a variety of short stories, if one is smitten with a certain type and will only read that type, then it is better than not reading any short stories at all. William Boyd, a Scottish author, has proposed seven different types of short stories:

³⁵ May, "Why Teaching the Short Story Today is a Thankless Task," 158-59.

³⁶ At the time of this article's publication, the latest editions are Min Lee, ed., *The Best American Short Stories 2023* (New York: Mariner Books, 2023); Lisa Unger, ed., *The Best American Mystery and Suspense 2023* (New York: Mariner Books, 2023); Lauren Groff, ed., *The Best Short Stories 2023: The O. Henry Prize Winners* (New York: Anchor Books, 2023); Mark Wish and Elizabeth Coffey, eds. *Coolest American Stories 2024* (New York: Coolest Stories, 2023).

³⁷ Craddock, *Preaching*, 78.

³⁸ Craddock, *Preaching*, 80.

“event-plot,” “Chekhovian,” “modernist,” “cryptic/ludic,” “mini-novel,” “poetic/mythic,” and “biographical.”³⁹ Here are descriptions of each:

Event-plot stories are stories with a readily identifiable plot. O. Henry stories with their surprise ending fall into this category. So do detective and ghost stories.⁴⁰ These stories have wide appeal and are a good place for students to begin.

Chekhovian stories are named for the Russian short-story writer Anton Chekhov, who loved to portray snippets of life in his stories with little or no commentary. Since these stories focus on portraying snippets of life, they can have a weak plot. James Joyce was known for writing “Chekhovian” short stories as can be readily seen in his short story collection *Dubliners*. Short-story writers Katherine Mansfield and Raymond Carver were also influenced by Chekhov.⁴¹

Modernist stories strive to be deliberately difficult.⁴² They can be like modern art in which the viewer asks, “What is this about?” “Lycia” by Brendan Williams-Childs is a good example of a modernist short story.⁴³ Unlike event-plot short stories, modernist stories are frustrating for readers who are new to this genre.

Cryptic/Ludic stories are closely related to modernist short stories as there is more to the story than meets the eye.⁴⁴ Joseph Conrad’s “The Secret Sharer” fits this mold.⁴⁵ You think the story is about one thing when it is about something else.

Mini-Novel short stories attempt to give readers the feel of a novel in the space of a short story. They have multiple characters and multiple plots. Writers of these stories want to say, “You see, you don’t need hundreds of pages to write a novel.”⁴⁶ James D. F. Hannah’s “No Man’s Land” is an example of a mini-novel short story.⁴⁷

Poetic/Mythic stories can range from poetic to stream-of-consciousness to gnomic. They prefer symbolism to reality.⁴⁸ William Faulkner’s “The Old People” is a good example of a poetic/mythic story.⁴⁹

Biographical stories would be better named “historical fiction” in which you have either a fictive story in a real-life setting or a biographical story with fictive elements.⁵⁰ Rudyard Kipling’s “The Gardener” about a woman and her nephew set in the years surrounding World War I is an example of a fictive story set in a real-life setting.⁵¹ Greg Jackson’s “The Hollow,” which touches on the life of Vincent Van Gogh, is an example of the latter type of biographical story. In

³⁹ William Boyd, “The Short Story [2004],” in *Bamboo: Essays and Criticism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), 196-99.

⁴⁰ Boyd, “The Short Story [2004],” 196.

⁴¹ Boyd, “The Short Story [2004],” 196-97.

⁴² Boyd, “The Short Story [2004],” 197.

⁴³ Brendan Williams-Childs, “Lycia,” in *The Best American Mystery and Suspense 2022*, ed. Jess Walter (New York: Mariner Books, 2022), 253-67.

⁴⁴ Boyd, “The Short Story [2004],” 197-98.

⁴⁵ Joseph Conrad, “The Secret Sharer” in *31 Stories*, ed. Michael R. Booth and Clinton S. Burhans (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1960), 45-75.

⁴⁶ Boyd, “The Short Story [2004],” 198.

⁴⁷ James D. F. Hannah, “No Man’s Land,” in Walter, 111-22.

⁴⁸ Boyd, “The Short Story [2004],” 198.

⁴⁹ William Faulkner, “The Old People” in Booth and Burhans, 105-18.

⁵⁰ Boyd, “The Short Story [2004],” 198-99.

⁵¹ Rudyard Kipling, 1865-1936, “The Gardener,” in *Debts and credits* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, 1926), 339-52.

the story, Valente, the protagonist, says Van Gogh was killed by teenagers rather than by suicide—something that is more fiction than fact.⁵²

The problem with categorical labels is that relatively few short stories come with labels affixed to them by which to recognize them. And, of course, Boyd's categorization is not the only one. One could characterize short stories by other labels such as crime fiction, science fiction, and spiritual fiction. Still, Boyd's and other categorizations can help one think of the types of short stories one likes to explore and will draw one into further reading.

Short Story Club

Another way for teachers of preaching to encourage homiletics students to read short stories is to organize a short story club. In this case, the teacher of preaching would propose a list of short stories for students to read and join them in reading. If, as Craddock says, the lack of reading time is the oldest fiction in the academy, then the teacher could demonstrate this is true by leading the club.⁵³ Still, participation in the club would be optional without any points assessed. A brief portion of each week's meeting time could be devoted to the discussion of a short story; or if class time is limited and must be devoted to required course objectives, then the teacher could propose a meeting time outside of class such as via videoconferencing to discuss the week's short story.

Another option would be an online discussion forum where participants could post their reactions, comments, and questions about that week's story.

If students are reading short stories as part of a club, they will be more likely to take up the practice and keep it going. When the course is over, the teacher could encourage the students to continue the club on their own. That way, the teacher would be free to start the next short story club the next time around.

The following are some questions that could be used to generate discussion:

What do you think the story is about?

Were there confusing parts to the story? If so, where?

What did you like about the story?

What didn't you like?

Does the story have traits that could be carried over into preaching? If so, which traits?

Of course, this list is suggestive and one could come up with many other questions. In looking for essays on a short story to help guide the group into discussion, one could search the *MLA International Bibliography* database to see if any were available.

Teaching the Short Story Using Memes and Twitter

In lieu of a short story club, teachers of preaching could follow the example of Erin Jensen, associate professor of English at Belmont Abbey College in North Carolina. Jensen developed an assignment in which students read several short stories and then picked one to demonstrate their understanding of that story by creating a series of tweets using memes. The tweets summarized the story from the viewpoint of a minor character in the story. Jensen assessed points based on how well a student summarized the story and created interesting tweets.⁵⁴ This could be another

⁵² Greg Jackson, "The Hollow," in *The Best American Short Stories 2022*, ed. Andrew Sean Greer (New York: Mariner Books, 2022), 68.

⁵³ Craddock, *Preaching*, 79.

⁵⁴ Erin Jensen, "How Do I Do It?: Using Memes and Twitter to Teach Short Stories," *Teaching American Literature* 13, no. 1 (Fall 2022): 86–95.

way to get homiletics students to read short stories since they would be tasked to create a set of tweets showing they have read at least one short story during the course. A small portion of each week's class time could be devoted to discussing the tweets that a student created. This would encourage other students to keep reading even though they were not presenting for the sole purpose of understanding other students' tweets. Of course, this also presupposes that students were reading from an assigned list set forth by the teacher. The tweet series and students' participation in the class discussion would be graded exercises. If students cannot be persuaded to read short stories on their own, then perhaps the only way to get them going is to make it a graded exercise.

Conclusion

Reading short stories benefits preachers. The primary benefit is not in finding sermon illustrations. Rather, the primary benefit is learning from short stories about how to say profound things briefly and in a way that gets people to sit up and pay attention. Thus, Craddock advised homiletics students to start reading short stories while they were in their studies and to continue the practice throughout their ministry. Still, given how time-constrained people's lives are and how daunting short stories can be, homiletics students will need assistance from their teachers to get started. That assistance comes in helping students see connections between short stories and sermons, giving them a reading list and some guidelines, and coming up with creative ways to get them reading via audiobooks, short story clubs, and digital media assignments. Students may bemoan the extra work, saying, "I thought I signed up for a preaching course, not a short story course." Teachers of preaching may think they already have enough to do without worrying about introducing short stories to their students. But, in the end, it is all for the benefit of preaching.