From *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story*

Frank O’Connor

*Frank O’Connor (1903-66), one of Ireland’s most respected writers, published one of the first and most influential full-length studies of the short story as a genre distinct from the novel. Though O’Connor’s thesis that the short story writer—not the novelist—wrote primarily about the marginalized can certainly be challenged, his study brought attention to an art that was neglected in 1962. To support his thesis, Connor analyzes the stories of Chekhov, Joyce, Mansfield, Lawrence, and Hemingway, among others. The world’s richest short story award is named after him.*

[T]he short story has never had a hero.

            What it has instead is a submerged population group—a bad phrase which I have had to use for the want of a better. That submerged population changes its character from writer to writer, from generation to generation….

            Always in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society, superimposed sometimes on symbolic figures whom they caricature and echo—Christ, Socrates, Moses….

            I have admitted that I do not profess to understand the idea fully: it is too vast for a writer with no critical or historical training to explore by his own inner light, but there are too many indications of its general truth for me to ignore it altogether. When I first dealt with it I had merely noticed the peculiar geographical distribution of the novel and the short story. For some reason Czarist Russia and modern America semed to be able to produce both great novels and great short stories, while England, which might be called without exaggeration the homeland of the novel, showed up badly when it came to the short story. On the other hand my own country, which had failed to produce a single novelist, had produced four or five storytellers who seemed to me to be first-rate.

            I traced these differences very tentatively, but—on the whole, as I now think, correctly—to a difference in the national attitude toward society. In America as in Czarist Russia one might describe the intellectual’s attitude to society as “It may work,” in England as “It must work,” and in Ireland as “It can’t work.” A young American of our own time or a young Russian of Turgenev’s might look forward with a certain amount of cynicism to a measure of success and influence; nothing but bad luck could prevent a young Englishman’s achieving it, even today; while a young Irishman can still expect nothing but incomprehension, ridicule, and injustice. Which is exactly what the author of *Dubliners* got….

            Clearly, the novel and the short story, though they derive from the same sources, derive in a quite different way, and are distinct literary forms; and the difference is not so much formal…as ideological. I am not, of course, suggesting that for the future the short story can only be written by Eskimos and American Indians: without going so far afield, we have plenty of submerged population groups. I am suggesting strongly that we can see in it an attitude of mind that is attracted by submerged population groups, whatever these may be at any given time—tramps, artists, lonely idealists, dreamers, and spoiled priests. The novel can still adhere to the classical concept of civilized society, of man as an animal who lives in a community, as in Jane Austen and Trollope it obviously does; but the short story remains by its very nature remote from the community—romantic, individualistic, and intransigent.