

Richard Stern

*on how
the stories
changed*

There are many handles on history. You can study changing styles of transportation, communication, jokes, songs, clothes, cuisine, curses, and what have you. For half a century, my professional handle was the stories written by students at the University of Chicago.

Twice a year, I'd assemble a class of about a dozen writers out of the forty or so who submitted stories as a form of application. The class was a workshop – that is, each session a student would read to the class the story he'd written. This would always be followed by com-

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ments from each of the other students and then a general discussion.

The changing subject matter of the stories over the years is the focus here, but a word should also be said about changes in literary style. Hemingway was alive in 1955, but for most students his style wasn't (*The Old Man and the Sea* was more frequently parodied than imitated). The Hemingway understatement implied stoic control of strong feeling. A good Hemingway story made clear that such feeling was underwritten by hands-on experience intelligently, bravely, and stoically digested. In the 1940s and 1950s, the obliquity and solidity of this style turned into the impassive notations of Camus' *Stranger*, perhaps the single most influential fiction of its time. In American fiction, this impassivity turned into minimalism, an unaccented accretion of decisive remarks, gestures, events, and situations that, though violent, were almost always quiet. Post-*Stranger*, French fiction was a systematically emotionless notation of objects, settings, human beings, and events sometimes organized by a covert mythic or even less apparent pattern. Only a few American students followed this French mode, although in class we talked about its theoretical justification, the essays of Roland Barthes and Alain Robbe-Grillet. Over the years, the protagonists of the student stories changed from Hemingway stoics to passive misfits and then, though less frequently, to barely described characters whose emotional reactions and interior development were beside the clinical point.

Many student stories from 1955 to, say, 1990 were about coming out of sexual or other closets of social abnormality. The misery and joys of discovering, practicing, and revealing to more or less unsympathetic relatives or friends one's homosexuality, criminality, or emotional

emptiness often made for very moving – and perhaps therapeutic – classes.

When parental divorce became common in the 1970s and 1980s, one sort of story dealt with the protagonists' puzzled resentment that their parents – sometimes grandparents – were leading second or third lives before they were launched on their first. It was as if there were but a fixed portion of life-stuff, and the children were being robbed of theirs by those whose duty was to lead them to it. The children in these stories were sometimes burdened by the additional weight of their forced complicity in the theft: they would be consulted about the suitability of parental partners, and then asked to serve as best man or maid of honor at parental nuptials.

A subgroup of these stories dealt with the young protagonists' intellectual and erotic discoveries, usually at college, and their failed attempts to interest, let alone absorb, their parents in them. Such failures either diminished or ratified the importance of the discoveries. In any case, whether the parents were sophisticated or naive, well educated or not, the discoveries marked a new level of independence.

American literature is rich in immigrant stories. The ones new in the 1970s and 1980s were about first-, second-, and, more rarely, third-generation Asian Americans. Earlier, the Indian-Pakistan political crises had initiated a literature whose most visible figure was Salman Rushdie. I had several Anglo-Indian students whose sometimes hilarious, sometimes touching stories described the old immigrant conflict between those still immersed in their countries of origin and their ever-more Americanized children and grandchildren. From what to eat and wear, to whom and how to marry and raise children, the subject matter of these stories was mostly domestic

compared, say, to the finest of Kipling's Anglo-Indian stories, Forster's *A Passage to India*, or Paul Scott's *Staying Behind*. Few students had the imagination and almost none had the experience to deal with the politics of adultery or the clash of nostalgia and expulsion on a public stage. Instead they dealt, often splendidly, with exchanges over dining tables, conflicts about television programs, and dating.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the stories by Asian American students tended to describe clashes between first and second generations. Sometimes these clashes emerged in class discussions, with first-generation students criticizing second-generation students for willful erasure of the ancestral past. More powerful were the dramas of helter-skelter flight from Vietnam followed by complex resettlement in the United States. There were also some U.S. Army veteran stories about the fields, jungles, rivers, battles, intrigues, miseries, and horrors of the war and the more or less difficult return home – the sort of story Hemingway and other veterans introduced into post-World War I literature. The Vietnamese story I remember best dates from the 1980s. It had to be rewritten over and over because of the writer's inexperience with English (I came close to rejecting her for the class). It had to do with a Vietnamese family who'd come in a great rush from Saigon, settled, and prospered in a small Ohio town. When they assembled for dinner, one chair was always left empty: it was the mother's agonized reminder of the baby they'd had to leave behind in Saigon with her mother. The absence of this child was the heaviest presence in the growing years of the narrator's life. One day, news came that the grandmother had died and that the now twelve-year-old child was coming to

Ohio to join the family. The end of the story concerned the mother's inability to handle this tremendous news. When the writer, a small, lovely Vietnamese girl, read it aloud, the class, after a silent moment, applauded – a rare occurrence.

More and more, the influence of television was seen in the stories: television programs were a lingua franca shorthand for appearance, style, occupation, whatever. So instead of “Who does he think he is, Hamlet?” one read, “Hey, Kojak, your lollipop's dripping.” In my last years as a professor of literature, the ubiquity and fluid power of the Internet and the ease and shorthand rhythms of email were altering narrative rhythms. These changes made for a speed of allusion that I think related to the increasing casualness of the relationships described in the stories. (Cell phones, digital cameras, BlackBerry devices, and iPods had not yet transformed lives, so I can't report on their narrative effects.)

What was also conspicuous was their global reach. I'd spent my student years trying to figure out ways to get to the Europe that Fitzgerald and Hemingway had described. Many of my students had been born and raised abroad and almost all had traveled. What they hadn't seen with their own eyes they'd seen in movies – movies that weren't filmed on Hollywood lots but on location around the world.

In retrospect, what interests me is the changing depiction of constriction and resentment, ambition and liberation, by privileged, intelligent, and ambitious young people in their late teens and early twenties.

Even more than most arts, literature depends on continuity as much as on change. Language itself is basically conservative, and the emotional repertory of human beings has not much altered. Many of the conflicts, quests, hierar-

chies, dreams, and appetites depicted in the three-thousand-year-old *Iliad* can be recognized, if not experienced, today. Literature teachers describe the differences that different places and times account for in works, and try to demonstrate their special narrative and poetic powers. Literary history – even an account of changes in student stories – may supply the historians of economic, social, and political change with something between filigree and marrow.

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