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MORDECAI MARCUS

What is an Initiation Story?

MUCH RECENT criticism, apparently beginning with Brooks and Warren's comments on Hemingway's "The Killers" and Anderson's "I Want to Know Why" in *Understanding Fiction* (1943), has used the term "initiation" to describe a theme and a type of story. Ray B. West's history of *The Short Story in America, 1900-1950* (1952) uses the term for one of two major types of short story. Several short story textbooks and textbook manuals employ the term, and other criticism applies it to novels.

The prevalence of inadequate criticism employing the concept of initiation suggests that the term requires clarification. I propose to examine the origins and definitions of this concept, to test it through application to a variety of stories, and to suggest its usefulness and its limitations. For the sake of convenience, I will—with the exception of a few short novels—confine my discussion to short stories.

The name and analytic concept of the initiation story derive basically from anthropology. The most important rites of most primitive cultures center around the passage from childhood or adolescence to maturity and full membership in adult society. Anthropologists call these rites initiation or puberty ceremonies. These ceremonies involve physical torture, cutting of various parts of the body, abstention from and ritualistic use of food, isolation, and indoctrination in secret tribal beliefs. According to most anthropologists the purpose of these rites is to test the endurance of the

novice, to assure his loyalty to the tribe, and to maintain the power of the adult community. But a few anthropologists believe that they stem from a psychological compulsion to propitiate the adult community or supernatural powers.

Certain "literary anthropologists" propose a concept of initiation apparently based on the idea of propitiating the adult or supernatural world. For example, Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) describes initiation as a stage in all human life. He derives his description of initiation from the experience of the typical mythical hero as he seeks adjustment and union with the forces of existence, such as the tempting woman and the threatening father. Other writers have analyzed similar initiation rituals in medieval literature.

A brief description of the ways in which fiction can embody ritual will help to show the relationship between these anthropological ideas and the initiation story, and will also be helpful in analyzing certain initiation stories. Ritual is difficult to define and to apprehend because most human behavior follows prescribed patterns unreflectively. Everyday patterns of behavior are recognized as ritualistic only when they are so exaggerated or deliberate as to appear out of the ordinary. Therefore, the formalized behavior of so-called civilized people will appear ritualistic in fiction chiefly under two circumstances: when it involves a response to an unusually trying situation in which a person falls back on socially formalized behavior, or when an individual pattern of behavior results from powerful psychological compulsion. Ritual may ap-

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pear in fiction in two more guises: through the portrayal of the formalized behavior of primitives or folkpeople and through symbols which suggest mythological parallels in people or action. Certain psychologists and anthropologists, particularly the disciples of Jung, tend to see a basic unity in all these manifestations of ritual, but it is safe to ignore without refuting this questionable doctrine, for it would not seriously alter most of my analysis.

The anthropologist's ideas about initiation would suggest that an initiation story shows adult society deliberately testing and indoctrinating the young, or shows the young compelled in a relatively universal manner to enact certain experiences in order to achieve maturity. But only a very small proportion of works called initiation stories, or meeting the definitions for them, show adults testing or teaching the young. Ritual does occur in some initiation stories, but it is more often of individual than of social origin. Education is always important in an initiation story, but it is usually a direct result of experience rather than of indoctrination. One concludes that the initiation story has only a tangential relationship to the anthropologist's idea of initiation.

The various critical definitions of the initiation story fall into two groups. The first group describes initiation as a passage of the young from ignorance about the external world to some vital knowledge. The second describes initiation as an important self-discovery and a resulting adjustment to life or society. But definitions within these two categories vary considerably.

According to Adrian H. Jaffe and Virgil Scott initiation occurs when "a character, in the course of the story, learns something that he did not know before, and . . . what he learns is already known to, and shared by, the larger group of the world."¹ Several critics, including Brooks and Warren (p. 344), and West (p. 75), explicitly define initiation as a discovery of evil. Brooks and Warren also state that the protagonist seeks to come to terms with his discovery, and West suggests that in learning to live with his knowledge the protagonist begins to achieve self-understanding.

The remarks of Brooks and Warren, and West, about achieving adjustment and self-understanding give their theories continuity with those which make self-understanding central to the initiation story. Curiously balanced between the two classes of definition is Leslie Fiedler's belief that "An initiation is a fall through knowledge to maturity; behind it there persists the myth of the Garden of Eden, the assumption that to know good and evil is to be done with the joy of innocence and to take on the burdens of work and childbearing and death."² Less ambiguous concepts of initiation as self-discovery are presented in two discussions of stories by Conrad. Carl Benson believes that *The Shadow Line* presents initiation as "the passage from egocentric youth to human solidarity."³ Albert J. Guerard finds initiation in *Heart of Darkness* and "The Secret Sharer" to be "progress through temporary reversion and achieved self-knowledge, the theme of man's exploratory descent into the primitive sources of being," but Guerard believes that this knowledge of evil makes us capable of good.⁴

Three of the critics cited insist or imply that initiation stories contain ritual but they offer no distinctions between kinds of ritual. Jaffe and Scott compare initiation plots to fraternity initiation ceremonies. West suggests that Hemingway is always ritualistic (p. 93), and refers to the "ritual of initiation" in "The Killers" and in Faulkner's "That Evening Sun" (p. 99). (The Faulkner story, I believe, does not present initiation.) Guerard's insistence on psychological compulsion and on the appropriateness of bloodshed in "a true initiation story" suggests that he may consider ritual vital to the form.⁵

A synthesis of these ideas will provide a working definition. An initiation story may be said to show its young protagonist experiencing a significant change of knowledge about the world or himself, or a change of character, or of both, and this change must point or lead him towards an adult world. It may or may not contain some form of ritual, but it should give some evidence that the change is at least likely to have permanent effects.

Initiation stories obviously center on a

variety of experiences and the initiations vary in effect. It will be useful, therefore, to divide initiations into types according to their power and effect. First, some initiations lead only to the threshold of maturity and understanding but do not definitely cross it. Such stories emphasize the shocking effect of experience, and their protagonists tend to be distinctly young. Second, some initiations take their protagonists across a threshold of maturity and understanding but leave them enmeshed in a struggle for certainty. These initiations sometimes involve self-discovery. Third, the most decisive initiations carry their protagonists firmly into maturity and understanding, or at least show them decisively embarked toward maturity. These initiations usually center on self-discovery. For convenience, I will call these types tentative, uncompleted, and decisive initiations.

Stories of tentative initiation typically show shocking experiences which leave their protagonists distraught. Since such experiences do not always lead towards maturity, one may demand evidence of permanent effect on the protagonist before ascribing initiation to a story. Stories of very young children offer the greatest problem here. In Chekov's "A Trifle from Life," Katherine Mansfield's "Sun and Moon," and Katherine Anne Porter's "The Circus," young children experience disillusionment in the trustworthiness of an adult, in the permanence of a delightful and picturesque event, and in the joyfulness and sincerity of a circus performance. In each story, a child is violently distressed, while the surrounding adults remain uncomprehending or unsympathetic. Only Miss Porter's story suggests that the disillusioning experience will have long-range effects, and since the suggestion is that they will be damaging, one can doubt that even this is a real initiation.

Despite one's hesitation to find initiation in these three stories, they are not far removed in theme and structure from many works which critics have called typical initiation stories—for example, several much discussed stories by Hemingway. Among these stories is "Indian Camp," in which Nick Adams watches his father perform a Caesarian operation on an Indian woman

and then sees that the woman's husband has killed himself to avoid witnessing her suffering. The story emphasizes Nick's discovery of death, but its conclusion asserts that Nick could not believe he would ever die. If Nick's discovery is to have permanent effects, one must assume that the story's conclusion describes a protective rationalization which cannot last. If this is true, then the story shows an approach to and a temporary withdrawal from mature realization.

Other stories by Hemingway show longer-lasting struggles at thresholds of maturity. "My Old Man" shows its protagonist learning that his father was a cheat despised by various people, and he is left struggling for an adjustment to this bitter knowledge. Hemingway's two stories of adolescent discovery of violence, "The Killers" and "The Battler," are perhaps more problematic than "Indian Camp" and "My Old Man." In "The Killers" Nick Adams is confronted with brutal and somewhat impersonal violence in the actions of the gangsters, and with despairing passivity in the behavior of the prizefighter Andreson. Various details suggest that Nick has never before witnessed such behavior. The end of the story shows Nick struggling for adjustment to his new knowledge, and contrasts his sensitivity to evil and despair with the insensitivity of Sam and George.

This story marks a tentative initiation into maturity, but analysis of its initiation theme has led to irresponsible interpretations. Brooks and Warren propose that Nick experiences "the discovery of evil" (p. 322), but this phrase makes Nick's experience uniquely symbolic of evil in general, which is more weight than the story can carry. Jaffe and Scott, probably building on Brooks and Warren's interpretation, find the story showing "a person who suddenly discovers the basic nature of existence," and claim that it is "about the meaning of life and man's place in the universe" (pp. 209–210). These interpretations are a far cry from the rather elementary experience of Nick Adams in "The Killers."

Quite possibly the idea that an initiation must be profound and universal has misled these critics. Jaffe and Scott's insistence that initiation is always "into the larger

group of the world" may also mislead them, for Hemingway's heroes are always initiated into a select group. Hemingway's "The Battler" records comparable encounters by Nick Adams, but this time he discovers treachery and uncertainty as well as violence. If the experience in "The Killers" is to be called *the* initiation into the meaning of existence, one might as well propose the same interpretation for "The Battler"; but again the idea appears irresponsible. Ray West's idea that "The Killers" is an initiation ritual finds little support in the story, for its only ritual element appears to be the operation of the narrow social codes of the gangsters and the prizefighter.

Disillusion, uncertainty, and violence also create the tentative initiation of Jody Tiflin in Steinbeck's three-part story "The Red Pony," yet the emphasis in this story is markedly different from that in Hemingway's two stories. Jody's farm life bristles with evidence of the uncertainty of life and the dependence of life on death, but only a series of incidents which involve him deeply begin to bring these truths home to Jody. Steinbeck does not show Jody's final realization, but Jody's feelings after he has seen Billy Buck's struggle to bring the colt to birth suggest that Jody will remember his initiating experiences. "The Red Pony" contains occasional suggestions of ritual (chiefly through parallels to primitive rites) in its emphasis on the slaughter of farm animals, and (in the form of individual compulsion) in Jody's constant attention to his pony and to the pregnant mare. In this story Steinbeck's view of the cycle of life is somewhat sacramental. Faulkner's view of nature in "The Old People" is distinctly sacramental. In this story, Ike McCaslin is ritualistically initiated into a communion with nature by Sam Fathers, the old Indian-Negro (the rites derive from a primitive culture), after which Ike sees a vision of the buck he has slain. Sam's instructions and Ike's own vision teach him to respect the sacredness of nature. Faulkner's story places less emphasis than does Steinbeck's on the pervasiveness of death, but it does stress the interdependence of life and death. Both of these stories present tentative initiations, for

they give only slight evidence that their protagonists are achieving maturity.

Although stories involving some self-discovery usually move beyond tentative and towards uncompleted initiation, self-discovery may be slight enough or sufficiently compounded with other feelings so that it does not lead beyond the tentative. For example, the protagonist of Joyce's "Araby" is disillusioned about the bazaar he longed to visit, and at the same time gains an insight into his own vanity. Perhaps because we see in him little struggle for adjustment, the shame which Joyce's protagonist suffers may seem less of a step towards maturity than the shock which Nick Adams experiences in "The Killers" and "The Battler." Another story which combines some self-discovery with tentative initiation is Dorothy Canfield Fisher's "Sunset at Sixteen," a story about a young girl whose first romantic yearnings and disappointments make her realize that she must experience years of struggle and pain to win through to the final peace of maturity.

The dividing line between tentative and uncompleted initiation is, of course, impossible to establish precisely. Initiation into knowledge of sex and into sexual desire might easily fit all three categories of initiation stories, but in two well known stories such experience illustrates uncompleted initiation. In Anderson's "I Want to Know Why" a boy recognizes moral complexity in the lives of two men whose sexual behavior contrasts with their other actions and reveals a combination of good and evil. Although Anderson's protagonist remains profoundly puzzled, the depth of his concern makes it likely that he will continue to strive for understanding. More complex is the uncompleted initiation in Alberto Moravia's short novel *Agostino*, which portrays a boy of thirteen first learning about the nature of sexual relations, then tortured by his relationship to his young and beautiful widowed mother, and finally unable to gain admittance to a brothel, where he had hoped to destroy his oedipal vision of his mother. *Agostino's* desperation and seething conflicts perhaps give more assurance that he will struggle towards maturity than does the dilemma of Anderson's protagonist.

Another harsh self-discovery accompanying a discovery about human life occurs in Lionel Trilling's "The Other Margaret." As this highly complex story concludes, a thirteen year old girl is forced to recognize that another person, and presumably all men, are responsible for their moral lives no matter what extenuating circumstances exist. From this insight she immediately moves to recognition of her own responsibility. Although the story ends with the girl weeping uncontrollably, the force with which she makes her discovery, its profoundly personal nature, as well as the girl's intelligence and sensitivity, strongly suggest that her discovery will have permanent effects. The smashing of the clay lamb, which object the protagonist's father identifies with her, is certainly symbolic and may introduce a ritualistic element through association with primitive rites, but ritual, I believe, is not essential to the story.

Self-discovery may be a more gentle correlate of discoveries about human life, as in stories of uncompleted initiation by Jessamyn West and Katherine Mansfield. Miss West's "Sixteen" (the final story in *Cress Delahanty*) portrays a self-centered girl who reluctantly goes home from college to be present at her aged grandfather's death. Details throughout the story suggest that Cress is scornful of the sensibilities of the old, of other people in general, and proud of the rare flowering of her own sensibilities. As her dying grandfather speaks to her of his love for the flower she wears and compares her to his dead wife, Cress realizes that his humanity is like hers, and so she discovers that she has been falsely separating herself from others. The story ends on a note of communion between the dying man and the girl, suggesting that she will change.

A parallel but more complex initiation occurs in Miss Mansfield's "The Garden Party," in which the adolescent protagonist, Laura, is intensely concerned with her relationships to everyone she deals with. Her self-centeredness, unlike Cress Delahanty's, is patronizing, and she is concerned to do what appears right. As the story concludes, Laura discovers the reality and the mystery of death, which discovery seems to ease the burden of living and yet demand that life be

understood. Although her problems are not solved, the conclusion suggests that she is in a better position to find life's realities. Laura's almost compulsive concern with the dead man is perhaps psychologically ritualistic, and—as Daniel A. Weiss has observed⁶—her descent to the cottage of the dead man parallels Proserpine's descent to the dead. But these ritual elements are slight.

A somewhat comparable theme is presented in Katherine Anne Porter's "A Grave." This story at first portrays a girl of nine who confronts the mystery of birth and death as she bends over the open body of a pregnant dead rabbit. But it is twenty years later that the meaning of this experience crystallizes for her. Rather than portraying an actual initiation, this story shows a mature person remembering from her years of immaturity a symbol for more recent knowledge. But its revelation that growth has occurred strongly parallels the initiation theme. Robert Penn Warren's "Blackberry Winter," which Ray B. West analyzes intensively as an initiation story (pp. 77–80), slightly resembles "A Grave." Warren presents a series of potentially disillusioning experiences which a nine year old boy experiences on one day. At the story's end, flashing ahead thirty-five years to the present, the first-person protagonist implies that the experiences of that day prefigured all of his subsequent life. Unlike Miss Porter's story, however, Warren's gives no indication of how or when the early experience was recognized as a prototype of the later, and the result is a feeling of melodramatic cheating in the conclusion. West's detailed analysis of the story mistakenly insists that the nine year old boy understands the meaning of his experience.

Although these stories by Miss Porter and by Warren make a special use of the initiation theme, they stand at the borderline between stories of uncompleted and decisive initiation. As one might expect, some stories of sexual initiation are likely to stand at a similar crossroads, for initial sexual intercourse is in one sense always decisive but also points toward character development. Hemingway's somewhat cynical story "Up in Michigan" portrays the simple disillusionment of a girl who is half-willingly

raped by a man whom she has admired from a distance, but the story stops rather abruptly after her sexual initiation. Far more complex is Colette's short novel *Le Blé en Herbe* (translated as *The Ripening*). In this story, sixteen year old Phillipe spends an idyllic and yet often bitter summer at the sea-shore in the company of a fifteen year old girl, Vinca. Both children are pained by the uncertainties of growing up, but before the summer is over Phillipe has had an extended sexual initiation with a sensual woman of thirty, and then one brief and somewhat unsatisfactory intercourse with Vinca. Although Phillipe develops no sense of sexual guilt from his major experience, its undecided effect on his future, and his great passivity and uncertainty, leave him still bitter and unhappy. Two symbolic details help communicate these feelings and add touches of ritual to the story through association with myth or primitive rite. When Phillipe's lover first invites him into her house, she presses on him a glass of very cold orangeade, and Phillipe repeatedly thinks of the bitterness of the drink as he struggles with his feelings about the woman. When Phillipe returns to the woman's house he tosses a bunch of thistle-flowers into her garden and accidentally wounds her face. Summoning him into the garden, she presses a drop of blood onto his hand. The next time Phillipe returns, their sexual affair begins. Both ritualistic details symbolize his partially disillusioning experience.

Moravia's short novel *Luca*, which portrays a more profound and decisive initiation than Colette's, employs a sexual initiation to create its denouement. *Luca* is pervasively ritualistic, often combining psychological compulsion and mythical parallels. The story traces out the struggles of a fifteen year old boy who feels progressively alienated from his mother and father, his school, and his once precious pursuits. He compulsively rejects all contacts because of their hypocrisy and impurity, and proceeds to cut himself off from life. Ritualistically he gives away his most valued possessions, rejects gestures of friendship, and imagines himself passively dead. In a ritualistic game of hide and seek in the dark (an exaggerated

version of the cultural ritual of the beckoning but elusive woman), he grows interested in a woman, but she dies before he can keep an appointment with her. Finally, after long illness and delirium, he is initiated into sex by a much older woman, whom he perceives as an earth goddess; and feeling at last in vital contact with all of life, he moves decisively towards mature acceptance.

A fusion of psychological accuracy and familiar archetypes is less certain in Conrad's "The Secret Sharer." Albert J. Guerard finds in this story the archetype of the mythical night journey, which represents a descent into the unconscious.⁷ "The Secret Sharer" unquestionably shows psychological ritual: its protagonist must exert himself to an extreme to conceal his double, and he acts in a trance-like manner. Most striking is his compulsion to drive his ship as close to the land as possible, presumably so that he may show Leggatt his gratitude for the experience of self-discovery. How far he has gone beyond the discovery of courage and endurance amidst loneliness remains problematic, but the final sentences of the story reveal that he has achieved a decisive initiation. One may, however, question whether the idea of the exploratory night journey is well established as a myth.

Clearly formalized primitive ritual occurs in two well known stories which portray decisive initiations: Steinbeck's "Flight" and Faulkner's "The Bear." Pepé, the Mexican boy in "Flight," is suddenly projected into manhood when he must bear the consequences of having killed a man over a point of honor. From the story's opening Pepé's behavior shows rituals of his culture: he practices knife throwing, yearns for manhood, dons his father's garments. Perhaps more ritualistic is his flight from the avenging pursuers. The act itself, with foreknowledge that he is probably doomed, is ritualistic, as are his preparations, his course through the mountains, and his final deliberate confrontation of death after his case is hopeless.

The primitivistic ritual in Faulkner's "The Bear" is identical with the ritual in "The Old People," of which story it is a sequel. Sam Fathers marks the forehead of Ike McCaslin with the blood of his first slain

deer, thereby bringing Ike into communion with the wilderness and nature. This incident is less detailed in "The Bear" than in "The Old People," but its meanings are much more deeply explored in additional incidents. Other ritualistic details in the story include Ike's abandonment of his watch, gun, and compass before he can get his first glimpse of the bear, Old Ben, and Sam Fathers' patient training of the dog Lion, who is to bring down Old Ben. Both incidents combine psychological compulsion and the sense of a half-intuited myth, the feeling that nature demands a certain rite. More distinctly psychological are the ritualistic intensity with which Ike pores over his grandfather's ledgers in pursuit of evidence of iniquity, and Ike's decision to renounce the land he has inherited from that grandfather and to adopt the Christ-like trade of a carpenter. All of these rituals are part of a decisive initiation: Ike's establishing a correct understanding of what it means to own the land and of how men may redeem their right to own the land. Faulkner's primitive and psychological rituals in this story are always convincing.

Ritualistic elements lend much coherence and power to these stories of decisive initiation, but ritual is not necessary in such a story. F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Freshest Boy" describes a decisive point in the life of Basil Lee, which turns him away from egotism and snobbery towards self-discovery and social acceptance. Unfortunately, the turning point in the story—Basil's observation of a major frustration in the life of a football hero—is sentimental, as are some of the accompanying details. Fitzgerald's inability to create a vivid event to change his protagonist makes the story unlike most initiation stories, but Basil's final and decisive turn toward maturity is convincing.

The greater prevalence of ritual in stories of decisive rather than tentative or uncompleted initiation is striking, but it is not too difficult to explain. The full initiations which these stories present usually grow out of strong desires for self-discovery rather than from accidents. Use of psychological compulsion and struggle makes it easy for the writer to incorporate primitive or mythological ritual material when it is available.

Primitivistic ritual is perhaps too rare in fiction to be generalized about, but it seems chiefly to accompany decisive initiation. Ritual elements are absent from or unimportant in most stories of tentative and uncompleted initiation, and they are not a definite requirement for decisive initiation.

If such stories as several by Hemingway, Anderson, Trilling, and Miss Porter are to remain in the canon of initiation stories—where they have been placed by various critics—a comprehensive definition like the one I have suggested must be adopted. This definition has the virtues of separating stages of initiation and of avoiding insistence on universal and profound meanings. Furthermore, not only should the critic show caution in ascribing ritual to a story, but he should analyze its type and its precise manifestation. These virtues, in turn, may assist careful analysis of meaning and construction. This definition, of course, has the defect of being so broad that almost any story of developing awareness or character can fit it. However, it is possible to exclude stories of simple recognitions about people and perhaps most stories about adults.

The alternative to my broad three-part definition is the close restriction of initiation to what I have called decisive initiation. Such a definition would insist on a clear-cut entrance into the adult world. Ritual would not be a central requirement for the form, but it would be a distinct likelihood. (Some critics, of course, might wish to limit initiation to stories containing ritual.) This definition might reduce the possibility of over-interpretation of stories such as "The Killers" and "Blackberry Winter," but sensibility will always remain more important than critical terms.

We see, then, that a certain anarchy has unnecessarily prevailed in the idea of the initiation story. Its relationships to anthropological ideas, even those of the "literary" anthropologist, are somewhat tenuous, and its use of archetypes and rituals is exaggerated. As is the case with many literary ideas, its central danger lies in its insistence on phenomena where they simply do not exist—in relying on a concept as a matter of faith. If one believes that initiation sto-

ries must present ritual, he may find ritual in "Indian Camp" or "The Circus," where they do not exist (except in the manner in which all human behavior is ritualistic). Leslie Fiedler's insistence that initiation is basically a discovery of guilt is an equally mistaken matter of faith. Many of the initiation stories I have discussed lack ritual and guilt.

Clearly defined and applied with sensibility and without fanaticism, the concept of the initiation story may assist thorough understanding of many works of fiction. But without these virtues, it may well serve only

as another tool for reductive or misleading interpretation.

¹ *Studies in the Short Story* (New York, 1949), p. 155.

² "From Redemption to Initiation," *New Leader*, 41 (May 26, 1958), 22.

³ "Conrad's Two Stories of Initiation," *PMLA*, LXIX (1954), 49-50.

⁴ Introduction, *Heart of Darkness* (New York, Signet edition, 1950), p. 14.

⁵ *Conrad the Novelist* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), p. 40n.

⁶ "Crashing the Garden Party," *Modern Fiction Studies*, IV (1958-59), 363-364.

⁷ *Conrad the Novelist*, p. 26.