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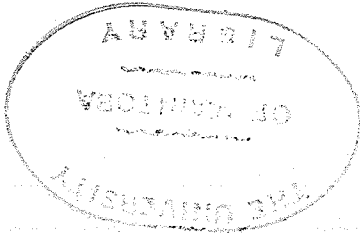
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SHORT STORIES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE IN A REPRESENTATIVE SECTION OF AMERICAN

A CONSIDERATION OF THE ART AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TREATMENT OF

THE CHILD IN THE AMERICAN SHORT STORY;

ABSTRACT

of a thesis entitled

THE CHILD IN THE AMERICAN SHORT STORY:

A CONSIDERATION OF THE ART AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TREATMENT OF  
CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE IN A REPRESENTATIVE SELECTION OF AMERICAN  
SHORT STORIES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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The study has a twofold purpose: to analyze the use of childhood and adolescent characters in American short stories and to throw light upon the motives lying behind the extensive use of such characters. Chapters are formed on the basis of thematic considerations: the child himself, the changes of adolescence and the artistic use of adolescent characteristics, and parent-child relationships. Altogether thirty-nine stories are examined, stories representing fifteen American authors of this century.

The writer finds that stories of childhood and adolescence fall into two groups: those in which the author is interested in the child himself and those in which the characteristics of childhood--especially the inexperience and innocence of adolescence--are used to explore some of the problems of existence. Stories of the first group, the writer believes, owe their existence to the child-centredness of the American culture and to the interest of contemporary psychology in childhood, an interest which authors have closely paralleled. Stories of the second group--those with other levels of meaning--often express disillusionment. On the other hand, two of the most powerful stories of adolescence give us two "resounding affirmations of the human spirit." In the final chapter the writer states his view that for many authors the adolescent character became the instrument and symbol of ambivalence--the ambivalence which resulted from the loss of American innocence.

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## CHAPTER I

### PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

A twofold purpose underlies the following study. On the one hand, it will analyze the use of child and adolescent characters in a representative selection of twentieth century American short stories. On the other hand, it will attempt to throw light upon the motives which lie behind the use of child and adolescent characters in these stories. In adopting the unique approach of grouping together stories which treat childhood and adolescence, the present study will bridge a gap which has existed heretofore in short story criticism. For in spite of the fact that many of the stories to be considered in this study have appeared in a number of anthologies, and in spite of the fact that much has been written on individual stories as they relate to the total work of this or that particular author, stories of childhood and adolescence have never been examined in relation to one another, nor have they been considered for their total, cumulative significance in the stream of American literature. It is in the belief that there are important relations within this group of stories, and that there is a considerable significance to this body of literature, that the following pages have been written.

The fact that a large number of short stories of our time do

feature child and adolescent characters is one which appears to be little realized or appreciated by short story critics. It is a fact, however, which is easily confirmed by a glance at the table of contents of any one of a number of short story anthologies which have appeared in the course of the last half-century. The forty-odd stories considered in this study -- and these only a representative sample -- indicate, surely, that in purely quantitative terms, childhood and adolescence have been major concerns of American writers in the first half of the present century. Moreover, when one pauses to reflect on the truly great short story achievements of this period, immediately such titles come to mind as "The Killers", "The Red Pony", "Silent Snow, Secret Snow" and "The Bear": all of these are stories which feature child or adolescent characters. Both quantitatively and qualitatively then, it appears that childhood and adolescence are subjects which have been highly favored by American writers of the present century.

Why is this so? Why do American writers choose so often to write about child and adolescent characters? What does the existence of this considerable body of literature indicate of the twentieth century American artist's attitude toward life? What do these stories reveal of contemporary American culture? Are they symptomatic of some deep malaise? Or do they, on the contrary, indicate youthful health and vigour? These are the problems which the following study will attempt to illuminate, and these are the questions for which it will provide at least partial answers.

The stories included in the study are drawn from a wide variety of authorship -- as separated in time as Sherwood Anderson and Truman Capote, and as geographically removed as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County in the South from Steinbeck's Pastures of Heaven in California. Such diversity in authorship makes for an extremely heterogeneous body of material -- so heterogeneous, in fact, that grouping these stories together is possible only by virtue of their single unifying characteristic; that is, that all of them feature child or adolescent characters in a prominent way.

This heterogeneity makes the task of dividing our primary material into convenient discussion units an extremely difficult one. Chronological considerations are of little help in this regard, and division on the basis of authorship involves one in innumerable repetitions and cross-references. While no method of division proves completely satisfactory, a way out of the difficulty is suggested by the recurring themes in the stories themselves. It is, therefore, on the basis of thematic considerations that the following chapters are formed. Some writers choose to write about child characters purely out of fascination with child behavior. Our second chapter will consider a group of stories in which this is the case. Other writers have been interested in the physical and emotional changes of adolescence; and closely related to stories of this type, some writers have used the characteristics of the adolescent -- his ambivalent moods, his idealism -- for the expression of personal feelings and views in regard to twentieth century life.