

## THE SHORT STORIES

*Glen Cavaliero*

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Sylvia Townsend Warner may have been neglected by the critics, but her work was not unread. For over forty years her short stories appeared in *The New Yorker*, giving her a world-wide reputation; over one hundred and fifty of them appeared in published collections. Clearly she found them an appropriate medium for her gifts.

Those gifts included a talent for the telling phrase; similes that illuminated and did not distract; an eye for strangeness and incongruity; a detailed knowledge of the practicalities of daily life; the power to generalise informatively, an apparent inability to waste words, and a tart, unjudging awareness of the quirks and perversities of human nature. Also, an essential skill, she knew how to secure attention.

Mary Glasscastle would have stayed quietly in his memory's cold storage if she had not been murdered.

Each warehouse along the London Thames has its staff of cats, half a dozen of them or more, heavy and redoubtable, hunters like William Rufus.

Private charity still persists in England though mostly it is practised in the disorderly, hole-and-corner style recommended by Jesus.

The adroit, personal cadence and controlled aplomb betoken a confidence that becomes reciprocal. Nor are the stories in one mould; at the end one often finds oneself facing

in a direction opposite to that in which one had set out. A good example is "During a Winter Night", which gives a soberly ironical account of an overworked mother and landlady whose preparations for suicide are interrupted by the need to save her lonely lodger from a similar attempt. The coincidence only serves to reinforce the desperation which the plot defines: the story ends, "The kettle boiled and boiled away while she stood weeping for misery and mortification and defeat." These are not just straightforward *contes* with a sting in the tail, nor are they primarily expressions of mood or feeling: they owe as little to Mansfield as to Maugham.

The stories fall into four distinguishable groups. The ones collected in *The Salutation* (1932) and *More Joy in Heaven* (1935) are rather folksy and derivative; the shades of T.F. Powys and A.E. Coppard hang about them. The Second World War produced a shift in style and tone. *A Garland of Straw* (1943) and *The Museum of Cheats* (1947) are caustic, sometimes frivolous; on occasion anger degenerates into a sneer. But as pictures of civilian life in wartime these stories compare illuminatingly with those of Elizabeth Bowen. Instead of the haunted London of the Blitz one is made aware of provincial England, beset as much by inconveniences as hazards. Food shortages, the upending of taboos, the disparity between the war and the response it ordinarily evokes, are what interest Sylvia Townsend Warner. Few writers have such a feeling for the long little-ness of life and such a flair for making its dissection entertaining.

In *Winter in the Air* (1955), *A Spirit Rises* (1962) and *A Stranger with a Bag* (1964) her command is absolute. She has a sure eye for local detail and historical tradition, as well as for the motives individual people have for living as they do. An unlaboured irony colours many of the tales, usually in the shape of recovery from disaster. "Idenborough" provides an instance of this. Accompanied by her second husband, a wife revisits the small country town in which she had for two nights been unfaithful to her first one. The cause of the visit is fortuitous, and shows the author's mastery of the comedy of accidentals. Next, the reason for Amabel's

emotion is broken to us, her happy acceptance that the town no longer looks as it did turning to dismay on her realising that it was another Idenborough she had visited before. Bedfordshire, not Oxfordshire: happiness has blinded her now as then. Her feelings of inadequacy resolve themselves into an affirmation of the past moment. "It existed by her secrecy; to speak of it would be to dismiss it, like the small crystal world of a bubble, into common air. Any infidelity but that." The tragi-comedy is further emphasised by the loving detail with which the second Idenborough is set before us. The author's architectural sense is very sure.

But by the time of *The Innocent and the Guilty* (1971) it was clear that she was getting a shade weary of writing in this mode, and her two efforts to portray the world of contemporary youth do not ring true. It is therefore not surprising, given this weariness and her own refusal to regulate her talents, that she should in the last years of her life embark on an entirely new venture. *Kingdoms of Elfin* (1977) was not her first essay in systematic fantasy (*The Cat's Cradle Book* had preceded it by over a decade) but in it she put the art to novel use. The fairy courts and kingdoms she describes so minutely are not so much commentaries on, or correctives to, our own world as parallel to it, involved in it, and sharing many of its habits and limitations. The tales provide a gloss on human institutions, and are delightfully free from knowingness and whimsy; they succeed in making the fairies creatures of fantasy in every meaning of the term. It is as though Sylvia Townsend Warner was producing an imaginative commentary on her own achievement, that of one who could celebrate the singular without declining into singularity. It is a gift as heartening as it is rare; and nowhere is it more in evidence than in her stories. She illuminates her subject matter from odd angles, adapting reality without transfiguring it. This most traditional of writers was at heart a modernist, fusing imagination with wit and lacing the result with her own particular blend of fantasy and tolerant good sense.