

A close-up photograph of a typewriter keyboard. The focus is on a single key with the word "WRITER" printed on it in a dark, serif font. The key is set against a light-colored, textured background. The surrounding keys and the dark, possibly black, surface of the typewriter are visible but out of focus.

WRITER

At a Sitting: Readings for Writers  
By Mike Smith

Mike Smith

At a Sitting:  
Readings for Writers

Edited By Amy Burns

Spilling Ink Review • Glasgow  
[spillinginkreview.com](http://spillinginkreview.com)

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## Some Thoughts on Beginnings & Endings in Prose Fiction

A useful definition of the short story is one that says it is ‘a piece of prose fiction that can be read at a sitting’; nothing to do with style, form, or content, and all the flexibility that reading speeds and the elasticity of unspecified time can bring.

There is however one definite in this, whether we are talking about a 17,000 word sitting, or an 800 word one. It is that the story will be read in one go. It is not going to be put down, and picked up again for a second sitting. That is the presumption you can make, if you are writing short stories, of whatever length. If you make the opposite presumption, you must think of yourself as writing a novel, or a novella.

A couple of years ago I read Vassily Grossman’s monumental novel, *Life and Fate*. With something like two hundred named characters, split into several groups, and scattered through locations from the Russian Steppes to the forests of Poland, I could manage only a few pages at a sitting, and when you look at the construction of the book, at the length of its many chapters, you see that such a fragmented reading has been catered for, intended even. If we take my initial definition as the one that separates them from the short story, novels, and novellas have to be written on the assumption that they will not be read at a sitting. They have to be constructed like highways, upon which plenty of comfort stops are provided. If you can go a little longer, read on to the next one.

Short stories don’t work like that. We need a different analogy, a more apt metaphor. Short stories, you pop into your mouth in one go. They are not a meal. They are a bite-sized snack, and sometimes I have consumed a collection of them, like a box of irresistible chocolates, in one greedy, indulgent evening. Short stories do not need to be constructed of many endings and beginnings. Indeed, it may be that they need to be not constructed in that way. This quality makes several demands upon the writer, which may again, be explored by looking at the metaphors we might think of as being appropriate.

A short story might be seen as a leap, rather than as a route. That does not mean it is without constituent parts. There might be a run-up, a jump, a flight through the air, itself split into a rising, and a falling, and the end must be a landing of sorts: a solid, two footed thump, a paratrooper’s roll, a stumble, a frantic finger-tip grab.

Short story lengths are notoriously varied. Look at the current competitions on offer. There are some common benchmarks, almost like auctioneers’ bid steps, beginning with the flash fictions: 50 words, 100 words, 250 words, 500 words, and then the more traditional, 1000 words, 2,000, 3,000, 5,000, 8,000, and 15,000 words. How far do we go before a story needs to be constructed with the expectation that it will be put down, and picked up again, before it ends?

The longer the short story the less my leap analogy seems to fit. Perhaps, going hand over hand along a rope, across a chasm, would better suit? Each hand move seen as a stage in the movement, but not as a cessation of it.

The point I am edging towards, is that the junctions between the constituent parts of shorts stories may be based on a fundamentally different concept to that underlying those between the parts of a novel. In the former case they will be in the nature of links. In the latter they will be in the nature of breaks. The metaphors for them too should emphasise the difference. The short story may require waymarkers, where the novel will require service stations. In the one you might scramble across a log bridge. In the other you would wait, overnight, for the morning ferry. A short story runs out like an anchor chain. A novel cruises from port to port.

The implications are clear. In a short story you are not so much providing the reader with comfort stops, but with stepping-stones. You are facilitating the journey, not providing breaks from it. The short story writer wants to keep his readers moving. The novelist wants to give them opportunities to stop, and thus needs to pair those with incentives to get them going again. For the short story writer, getting going again means going on to read another story.

In both cases endings and beginnings, most of them internal in the case of the novel, are critical. In the short story, there being only one of each, they become paramount. In the novel it may be the travelling through those internal endings and beginnings, rather than the arriving, that is the point of the exercise, but in the case of the short story, it is the arriving that dominates. We appreciate a short story by arriving at its ending, and there are many models for what sort of experience that might be. We experience the two forms differently, because of the difference in the way they are constructed, and that is because of the assumption encapsulated in the putative definition, that a short story is ‘a piece of prose fiction that can be read at a sitting.’

## Readings for Writers

This series of short essays was designed to examine the nature of short stories. Specifically I have been interested in how they end, and in what functions those endings may be said to perform, by which I mean, how do they act upon us, the readers. Following from that, I wanted to look at how those end-functions demanded the support of the beginnings of the stories, and of the content in between.

I hope I have shown that each of these stories has quite a different function for its ending, and makes quite different demands upon what has gone before, and gives a different pay-off to the reader.

Apart from *A Canary for One* by Ernest Hemingway and *The Ultimate Dare* by Andrew Wooding these stories can be found online at [Americanliterature.com](http://Americanliterature.com) among hundreds of short stories, by dozens of writers.

Holding Up a Mirror: *A Canary for One* by Ernest Hemingway  
Complete short stories, Fina Vigia Ed, Scribner.2003, pp258-261

Through The Hoop: *The Coup de Grace* by Ambrose Bierce

Affirmations: *Rothschild's Fiddle* by Anton Chekhov

Back to the Beginning: *The Man Who Could Work Miracles* by H.G. Wells

A Cumberland Sausage: *A Telephone Call* by Dorothy Parker

Review & Sleight of Hand: *The Ultimate Dare* by Andrew Wooding  
*Pinhole Camera 4*

## Holding Up a Mirror: A Canary for One by Ernest Hemingway

Not much seems to happen in this story, at least not until we reach the very last line.

The story takes place on a train journey through France. It begins with the train passing a house, in the garden of which tables are set in the shade of palm trees. It ends with the baggage being unloaded and the passengers leaving at the Gare du Lyons in Paris, almost. There is that last line still to come.

There are three main characters in the story, one of whom, the American lady, has the canary. The American lady is the one that the narrator focuses on, although he mentions his wife too, although only to report conversations she has been having with the American lady. The narrator is the third main character, although we are quite half way into the story before that is revealed; and it is done so in one of those subtle moves that gets me excited about short stories.

‘For several minutes I had not listened to the American lady, who was talking to my wife.’

This is the first time that the wife is mentioned too, and up to this point we might have wondered who the American lady had been talking to, or more correctly, who had been listening to her. Up to this point we have probably assumed that this is a third person narrative; one which has showed us several scenes from the train, and has allowed us to overhear several statements from the American lady.

Going back to the beginning, ‘The train passed very quickly along a red stone house with a garden...’ it is not clear whether we are looking at it, or from it. The description continues, still only hinting at the journey, ‘Then there was a cutting through red stone and clay, and sea was only occasionally and far below against rocks.’ In fact, it is beyond the next short paragraph, after the American lady has commenced her discourse about the canary and why she bought it, that Hemingway commits us to being on the train. ‘It was very hot in the train.’

This first half of the story, before the revelation of the first person narrator gives us a deal of description, of the journey, of the train, of the terrain through which it passes, including a burning farmhouse, and of the American lady and her canary. It is perhaps, up to this point, one of those stories that gives you lots of well written sentences, about which you find it hard to give a damn.

The shock of the narrator’s appearance though, heralds a change. Conversations now follow, and they hinge around the fact that the American lady believes that ‘Americans make the best husbands.’ We learn that she has prevented her daughter from marrying a Swiss. The narrator does not contribute to these conversations, which are between the American lady and his wife. In

fact he has spoken only once, at that halfway mark, and he speaks only once more close to the end, as they pass damaged railway carriages on the outskirts of Paris: 'Look,' I said. 'There's been a wreck.'

This is a story in which very little seems to happen, and what we are shown seems to have very little interest for us. An American lady, fearful of travelling, who has bought 'her own clothes for twenty years now from the same maison de couture', is taking a canary back for her daughter, whose love life she has thwarted. Then we reach that last sentence, set in its own new paragraph.

'We were returning to Paris to set up separate residencies.'

This bombshell revelation has not been hinted at before, yet we do not feel cheated, because nothing that has gone before is inconsistent with it. What it demands of us is that we re-visit the story in light of its implications. It enables an entirely new reading, in which, what we see, the quickly passed house and garden, the sea passing into the distance, what we hear, the American lady's story, are all re-valued in light of what is now our knowledge of the narrator's situation. Even the structure of the story, him being hidden, a detached observer, until the moment the American lady begins talking about American husbands, is cast into a new light. The whole story is packed with images, the burning farm, the solitary caged canary, the wrecked railway carriages that spark the narrator's second speech, that act as metaphors for, or echoes of the narrator's situation.

This is a particularly neat example of the twist in the tail: the revelation that takes us by surprise, yet which, in hindsight, is entirely consistent with what has gone before, but which, more than that enables us to, demands in fact that we re-read the story as an entirely different piece.

## Through The Hoop: The Coup de Grace by Ambrose Bierce

Ambrose Bierce, in *The Coup de Grace*, offers us an ending that is just as satisfying as Hemingway's in *A Canary for One*, but it is constructed along entirely different lines.

Short stories like these are built on the experience of getting to the end. That's where we get the gasp of recognition. That is where we come to see that what has been shown is not what it was thought to be. Such stories are ones in which the content, moulded by the form, has been shown in particular order, in which vital, significant information has been withheld until a particular moment. Such stories work by juxtaposition, and by revelation. They give us the shock of being brought to a halt, unexpectedly, of stepping into space.

Bierce's life was much bound up war, which he wrote about repeatedly, and it ended mysteriously after he set off for the Mexican revolution, saying that to be a 'gringo' there, was tantamount to suicide. He was never heard of again. Many of his short stories, including the one cited here, are set in the American Civil War, in which he served.

*The Coup de Grace* takes us to a battlefield on which the fighting is over, but the 'tidying up' is not. The dead and the dying are still lying untended as night comes on. Bierce's protagonist, Captain Downing Madwell, searches the field. As in Hemingway's story we are late coming to recognise him. Here it is the name that is withheld, until a third of the way in. At this point we are introduced to a triangle of related characters: Madwell himself, and two brothers, one of whom, Caffal Hadcrow, a sergeant, is his friend, while the other, Major Creede Hadcrow, his superior officer, is a mortal enemy.

It is the sergeant for whom Madwell searches, and he finds him, wounded and mutilated by scavenging animals. Having used his last cartridge to despatch a wounded horse, Madwell kills his friend with his sword. At this point two stretcher bearers arrive, and with them Madwell's enemy, and the dead man's brother. It is another story in which the punch is in the last sentence, in fact in the last two words: the name of the Major.

Unlike *A Canary for One*, Bierce's last line does not throw what has gone before into new light, but rather throws light ahead of it, onto what must surely happen next. Hemingway's and Bierce's stories show two distinct types of the 'twist in the tail'. In fact, I shall move on from that metaphor, to two separate ones. Whereas in both cases it is the last line that carries weight of the story, in which the ending is the most significant part, we have one, Hemingway's, in which that ending throws us back into the story already told, and the other, Bierce's, that projects us forward into a future we must imagine. One holds up a mirror into which we look, the other a hoop through which we jump.

This difference has immense implications for what the writers, respectively, need to have done before they get us to those endings. In Bierce's case he must establish beyond any doubt the emotional ties, positive and negative, that bind his three characters into that triangle. It is what we know that gives the last line its potency. In Hemingway's story the opposite is true. It is what we don't know that makes his last line so potent, and Hemingway's final revelation sends us back to the story he has told us with a changed perspective on it. Bierce, because of what he has brought us to understand of his characters and the circumstances they are operating in, uses his ending to project us into an imagined future. That we can make that leap is because what has gone before has given us a strong sense of how the two men, Creede Halcrow and Downing Madwell will use the situation in which they find themselves at the end of the story. It is not only Major Halcrow's enmity that will seize this opportunity, but Captain Madwell's that will prevent him from being able to defend himself.

There is a music hall joke about a yokel, who asked for directions, says, if I was trying to get to there, I wouldn't start from here. Luckily, as writers, we get the chance to start from wherever we wish, and in cases like the ones examined, we would be advised to know where we were heading, before we set out.

## Affirmations: Rothschild's Fiddle by Anton Chekhov

Not all short stories end with a twist in the tail. Chekhov's tale of the peasant Yakov's journey towards rehabilitation is such a one. As has been the case with the stories I looked at previously, this presents three major characters, and it is worth pausing here to reflect on how useful the character triangle is. It allows each one to view and to comment on the relationship between the other two. It allows three different relationships to be held up to comparison. It allows both positive and negative tensions, as in the Bierce story, to be expressed.

In the case of *Rothschild's Fiddle* two only of the possible relationships are put under scrutiny, and both, at least to begin with, are negative tensions. The primary one is that between Rothschild and Yakov. Despite the title, it is Yakov who is the central character. His attitude to Rothschild is abusive, aggressive and contemptuous. Circumstances bring them together, not affection. Yakov's other relationship, that with his wife, is equally negative. During the course of the story she falls ill and dies, and he reflects upon their lives together, and in particular upon the death of their only child.

There is a curious word used in this story: 'Vachhh.' It is the word evoked in Rothschild by the music of Yakov's fiddle. It is a powerful and expressive word, and in a translation, as the English version of the story is, is the only one unchanged from the original. It is the word that signifies Rothschild's understanding of the weight of the world that is carried and expressed by Yakov's playing. It signifies that Yakov has communicated his experience of life to Rothschild. The evocation of this word, which comes relatively late in the story may be viewed as having a similar function to the twists in the tail of the stories discussed previously. It is the climatic moment of the story, yet it is nowhere near the end.

Rothschild says it only twice, towards the end of the circa three thousand word story; once upon hearing the fiddle played, and again on playing it himself. In this story, where the burden of understanding, along with the fiddle, is passed from Yakov to Rothschild, and from Rothschild to us, it is the symbol and expression of taking the strain. It is loaded with all the emotional weight that Yakov has accumulated during the story. He has lost his wife, and has re-evaluated his life. He has re-imagined what it might have been, and has re-visited what it once was. He has remembered the loss of his baby girl, in contrast to the monetary losses that he meticulously records in his account books. He has reconciled himself to death, and to Rothschild, whom he addresses as 'brother'.

It is after this recognition that Yakov plays his violin for the last time:

‘And he began playing again, and the tears gushed from his eyes on to the fiddle. Rothschild listened attentively, standing sideways to him and folding his arms on his chest. The scared and perplexed expression on his face, little by little, changed to a look of woe and suffering; he rolled his eyes as though he were experiencing an agonizing ecstasy, and articulated, “Vachhh!” and tears slowly ran down his cheeks and trickled on his greenish coat.’

At the end of the next paragraph, the penultimate one, the dying Yakov says ‘give the fiddle to Rothschild.’ The final paragraph sees Rothschild with the fiddle, in the wider world, empowered by it, yet also a vehicle for its message:

‘...but when he tries to repeat what Yakov played, sitting in the doorway, the effect is something so sad and sorrowful that his audience weep, and he himself rolls his eyes and articulates “Vachhh!...”’

Again we see that it is the placing of the last line, the last thought or statement, the last word in fact, that gives the story its power. Yet unlike with the Hemingway and the Bierce this is not a twist in the tail. It is neither a mirror nor a lens, nor does it project us backwards into the story, nor forwards from it. Rather it is a culmination, an affirmation of the changed understanding, in Yakov, in Rothschild, and in us. We are reminded also, that it is the fiddle that is named in the title, and that it is named as Rothschild’s. This means that the title is about the state of things at the end of the story, and once again we see ending and beginning inextricably linked. The story itself is about how it got to be Rothschild’s, and what the significance of that is, for Yakov, for Rothschild, and for us.

## Back to the Beginning: The Man Who Could Work Miracles by H.G. Wells

H.G. Wells turned this short story, of a man who receives miraculous powers, into the screenplay for a film made during the nineteen thirties and starring the actor Roland Young.

The story concerns the young, argumentative George Fotheringay who discovers, without warning, that he has astonishing powers. As he explores the potential of these powers, encouraged by the chapel preacher, Maydig, he veers from the banal into the dangerous. Finally he causes the earth to stop its rotation, and in the ensuing holocaust, recognises that his only sensible course of action is to put things back the way they were before his very first miracle, and to refuse the powers themselves.

In retelling this story for the movies Wells added a great deal. He gave Fotheringay a job in a haberdashery, and through that embarked on an exploration of how the business world might wish to exploit the powers. He gave him a love interest, and was neatly able to make the point that such arcane talents have no control over the human heart, for though he can dress his girl however he wishes, he cannot sway her affection. These extra scenes slot in easily after several that are common to both tellings, and by doing so reveal something about this type of story.

*The Man Who Could Work Miracles* is a story that sets up a ‘what if’ situation and examines its implications. What would someone do with these powers, if granted them? In the film, Wells cast these examinations a little wider, and, despite the Hollywood reputation for dumbing down, a little deeper. The cast is greater, the incidents are more varied, and the motives of the characters are explored more widely, and more deeply.

The beginning and ending though, are substantially the same. Fotheringay begins by demonstrating his powers in the pub, and ends by rescinding them in the chaos of the end of the world. Arguably what passes between could be cut and pasted, pick and mixed, added to or subtracted from, almost endlessly. The story is a series of incidents caught in a net. The beginning opens it for inspection. The end closes it, and returns us to our own normality.

This is quite a contrast with the stories we have looked at previously. The end does not make us review the beginning or the middle. If anything it follows on from them. Neither does it project us in to a future. In fact it specifically does not. In this aspect it is reminiscent of the ‘Romantic Comedy’ as typified by stories like *The Tempest*, where characters are precipitated into a situation, their behaviours are studied, and then they are returned to their own lives.

Beginnings and endings are still connected, but they open and shut the story, rather than adding a potency to it. Curiously, Wells did add elements to both the beginning and ending of this tale in the movie version. He explained the source of the powers, and made them part of a wager between the Gods. This makes explicit their nature: the opening and closing of an experiment. One

of the difficulties in the story is to know who is telling it, and how they got to know about it, and authorial omniscience seems somehow unconvincing in this instance. Wells draws attention to the narrator only twice. Once is at the beginning. 'It is doubtful whether the gift was innate. For my part I think it came to him suddenly.' Later, around two thirds of the way in he does it again, by pointing out that 'the reader 'was' killed in a violent unprecedented manner in 1896,' and he promises to make clear how this might be, and reminds us that we are 'but little beyond the hither side of the middle' of the story.

Another detail worth noting is that Wells subtitled the story 'A Pantoum in Prose.' The Pantoum is a complex poetic form of Malayan origin, involving the repetition of lines in a sort of chain, through the poem, down to the last quatrain, in which two lines from the very beginning, as yet unrepeated finally get their repetition, so closing the poem and completing the circle. Again, we are offered a neat metaphor for this type of story: one that creates a complete circle.

We have now looked at four distinct types of short story endings, each of which has governed the functions of the content that precedes it. We have bounced off mirrors, leapt through hoops, passed on affirmations of our human sensibilities, and now completed a circle. All these four, though different share a common feeling though, that we have somehow reached a conclusion. They are all, in their ways, completions of sorts. Are there more linear forms? Ones that do not give a sense of completion? Ones that leave us neither looking back, nor seeing what is ahead, that challenge, rather than affirm our sensibilities, that leave us at a ragged end?

## A Cumberland Sausage: A Telephone Call by Dorothy Parker

Before we get to taste it, the most obvious difference between a Cumberland sausage and any other is that it is not constructed of links. It is made in one piece and measured by the yard. You cut off as much as you want, and make that cut wherever you want to.

If we take this for our metaphor of a short story, then we are implying that there is no special relationship between the beginning and the end, that neither beginning nor end indeed, has any particular location. Of course many stories may give this impression at their beginning that this is the case, but in the ones that we have looked at previously the endings have most definitely located both themselves, and the beginnings, when we finally reach them. Are there endings that do not do this?

Dorothy Parker's short story, *A Telephone Call*, begins in the middle of an ongoing situation, and ends in the middle of the same situation. Both the reader, and the single protagonist, have remained in the same place, as the unnamed girl waits, and prays, for a phone call from her absent lover. 'PLEASE, God, let him telephone me now' it begins, and it ends with her counting, 'five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty five, thirty, thirty five....'

In fact it is the counting that milestones the journey in this story, for she decides to count to five hundred 'by fives' early in the second paragraph, starts counting again roughly at the half way mark, and of course ends in the same way. These three markers emphasise only the passage of time, and between them we learn, obliquely, some of the background to what we come to realise is an asymmetrical relationship.

There are similarities here with the structure of Wells' story, in that the content could, arguably, be extended or contracted, exploring more, or fewer, of the aspects of that relationship, without fundamentally changing the nature of the story. As she waits for his call Parker's heroine re-visits the conversations she has had with her lover and sifts them for meanings. She rehearses what she might say if she were to call him. She talks herself into resisting her inclination to call, and re-assures herself, almost, that he, at any moment, will. The content, and point of the story, is that we sense, and experience her feelings. We see her situation as she presents it to herself, and probably, we convince ourselves that we understand her predicament much better than she does herself. She lays out for us the problems of such unbalanced relationships, the uncertainties, the self-loathing and anger, the hopes and the fears, and of course we are at liberty to match them to our own experiences as much as we are to hers.

Here is our linear story, with an ending that does not bounce us, return us, affirm us, or project us. It merely leaves us to reflect upon the situation that has been presented.

Yet, and I begin to wonder if this is part of the stamp of the short story as a genre, the ending is important, and it is related to the beginning, and it is the fact that in moving between them the protagonist has gone nowhere that is the point of the story. She

remains in the same place, counting her desperate five hundred ‘in fives,’ but we do not. If journeys are what story is about, it must be remembered that they may not be taken by the characters alone, and this is a case where the journey is not taken by the character at all. Yet, the beginning, and the ending, are still crucial, and still connected to each other, the ending still making demands upon the beginning, and upon the content that lies between.

In all the cases I have looked at there have been quite specific functions of the closing words of the short story, functions that influence, govern even, how the beginning must be handled, and what the content between must do. We can point to five quite clearly differentiated ways in which the stories may be said to work. The first makes us review what we have previously read. The second precipitates us into an imagined future, again based on what has gone before. The third ends with an affirmation of what we have come to understand of what we may as well call the ‘human condition’, and the fourth shows us an experiment on completion of which we return to normality. The fifth, sees an ending which does not return us to the beginning, but leaves us stuck there.

These five readings have been selected to illustrate these particular points. But what if we were to select another story at random? Would that lead us to an example of one of those already shown? Or would we find yet another pattern?

## Review & Sleight of Hand: The Ultimate Dare by Andrew Wooding

Many years ago I read a story that ended with the hero being attacked by assassins. He fought back, firing on them as they spilled from their car. One by one they fell, and after a protracted gun battle, the last fell silent. As he walked away, the one whose job had been to feign dead at the beginning, sat up and shot him dead.

The author here had not cheated us, but had given us a piece of information that, like his hero, we had misinterpreted. This sleight of hand, in which a vital piece of information is provided early on, pushed into the background during the rest of the story, and put to use at the end, supplies an ending that has the shock values of Hemingway's mirror, and Bierce's hoop, but is different from each. We suddenly review what has gone before, but not as we do in *A Canary for One*. We search for, or realise the significance of, that first, casually passed over snippet. We are projected into the future too, knowing what will be the outcome. This type of story ending, in a sense, straddles the other two.

The beginning sets the trap, the middle distracts us, and the ending springs it. Andrew Wooding, then a first year Creative writing student at Cumbria University, wrote a story using a similar technique, which was published in *Pinhole Camera 4*. In it, two characters discuss over coffee the implications of knowing in advance what your last words will be. Early in the conversation one suggests what those words might be for the other, and of course, at the end they are spoken by him.

Wooding's ending is sharp and amusing, yet clearly open to several interpretations. Because, in this case as in the others previously studied in this series, it is the actual last words of the story that carry the blow, we do not get to see what happens next. Does he die? And if so, how? And if not, does that mean the theory is discredited? Or that he has some repetitions 'in hand' before the prophecy comes true? And of course it is absolutely true that those last words would be inconsequential without that initial loading. Once again, the ending governs the beginning, and the middle diverts our attention from it.

In the half dozen stories I have looked at up to now, all of which have identifiable, and distinctly different types of ending, several common factors have emerged. They are that it is the very last words that, to borrow a phrase, have the last word!

The short story form seems to demand this, whereas novels often allow, or even demand, of the writer that he tie up loose ends, by adding on, after the most important story strand has been secured and dealt with, some paragraphs of information about the longer term outcomes of subplots and the fate of minor characters. You will find this in Dickens, and in the novella *The Shooting Party*, by Isobel Colegate, which I often quote. The short story seems to me to be a form in which the 'story' is much more tightly,

and definitively bound within its beginning and its ending. Could this be because, unlike longer pieces, it has only one of each, and because specifically it has only one ending.

The review of the stories I have looked at in these initial half-dozen pieces has led me to believe that it is the ending, absolutely, that is the most important part of the short story, the part to which all other parts are subservient, and of which, they are all in effect, a part.

The above is an ending to my analysis, but I want to go on and draw two more conclusions from it. The first is that we should not let the fact that the beginning of a story is where the reader engages with us blind us to the role of that beginning in preparing for the ending. The second is that when we have those initial flashes of ideas for short stories, we should be careful to note whether it is the beginning, or the ending, that we have stumbled upon.