The short story has long been considered the Cinderella genre: the literary form on which aspiring novelists cut their teeth—a kind of Twitter version of better things to come. Such a view can also be detected in the secondary curriculum. Choosing a collection of stories over a novel is often regarded as the shirker’s controlled assessment option and single-author short story collections are noticeably under-represented in prescribed text lists. When the genre does make an appearance, it tends to be in the form of exam boards’ own anthologies which, once embedded in departmental schemes of work, can soon lose their sparkle.

Yet short stories remain one of the cornerstones of English teaching: easily accommodated into the timespan of a single lesson and providing an accessible introduction to the kind of literary analysis required at key stages 4 and 5. A good short short story will always punch above its weight; its very brevity invites sustained close reading and lends itself to detailed examination of narrative structure and viewpoint. Some of the very shortest stories will have the distilled qualities of the prose poem, memorably defined by Huysmans’ fictional aesthete, Des Esseintes, as ‘the osmazome of literature, the essential oil of art’. Texts such as these might well be chosen as curriculum shortcuts, but studied with the concentration they deserve, they can provide as much ‘stretch and challenge’ as much lengthier prose fictions.

Close study of a skilfully-crafted story in the final stages of Year 9 can be especially helpful in easing students into the next key stage of English and for preparing the way for the assessment objectives which, for better or worse, they will need to grasp if they are to succeed at GCSE and A-level. One short story author who goes down well with this age-group is Kate Chopin. The only American to make it onto the English Literary Heritage list for key stage 3 (but unaccountably displaced by Congreve at key stage 4), Chopin’s accounts of nineteenth-century women negotiating their
place in a society where marriage and child-bearing are the only realistic prospects open to them, never fail to engage my all-female classes. One particular favourite is 'The Unexpected'. Taking just under ten minutes to read aloud, the story captures an epiphanic moment in the life of Dorothea, a middle-class young woman engaged to be married to the handsome and eligible Randall. The story focuses on the young man’s return after an enforced separation, prolonged by his illness. Shocked by Randall’s ‘hideous transformation’(180) and repelled by his feverish desire that she should marry him with all speed to secure his name and fortune, Dorothea takes to her bicycle and, as if fleeing from the grim reaper himself, escapes from the suffocating presence of her consumptive husband-to-be.

My first experience of teaching ‘The Unexpected’ was back in the 1990s, when it headed a Heinemann short story collection prescribed for GCSE. Approaching it from a staunchly feminist perspective, I led (some might say frog-marched) my students into investing all their sympathies in Dorothea. Meanwhile, just along the corridor, a male colleague was taking a somewhat different approach. His class, while understanding the predicament and feelings of the young woman, were equally sympathetic towards the feverish and frightened Randall, desperately holding on to his warm, healthy beloved as if to life itself. Exam season looming, students began to compare notes, grew alarmed by the conflicting interpretations—and panicked. As relatively seasoned professionals, my colleague and I managed to turn a minor crisis into a learning opportunity. We swopped classes, engaged with the ‘alternative’ perspective and an essential lesson was learnt: texts, however slight, can sustain multiple readings.

Guiding students to analyse and articulate how their individual responses to reading come about through a writer’s choice of language and structure is one of the most challenging aspects of teaching literature at key stages 3 and 4. The language of ‘The Unexpected’ is extraordinarily condensed and evocative, with a directness and accessibility which enables students new to close reading to enter the detailed world of the narrative. One of the most striking aspects of the story is Chopin’s merging of the vocabularies of passion and death. Asking pairs of students to place in separate columns words and phrases from the text which they think are associated with illness/death and those associated with life/passion is a simple, yet revealing, exercise. They start off confidently. Words such as ‘feverish’ and ‘wasted’ are neatly filed under ‘death’; ‘quiver’ and ‘clasp’ under passion. As they make their way
through the story, though, they start to run into difficulties, as the language of love and the language of the sick-room come into collision, driving home Dorothea’s dilemma and evoking the physical disgust she experiences while in the company of a man whose ‘breath was feverish and tainted’(180). A relatively simple activity, it is nonetheless one which demonstrates how just a few well-chosen words can have a forceful impact on the reader.

This type of focused reading can provide an excellent kickstart to imaginative writing. As Susan Hill has suggested the ‘best short stories are perfect examples of how to write—how to make few words do the work of many, how to encapsulate and to crystallise’. Getting really close up to a text such as Chopin’s not only develops close-reading skills, it can also make students more reflective about their own use of language. Moreover, a unit of work which involves a literary text in both reading and writing processes assists in breaking down the perceived barrier between ‘language’ and ‘literature’, encouraging candidates to consider the titles of their GCSE examination courses in a questioning frame of mind.

Attempting to emulate the economy and intensity of Chopin’s prose can show students that, in a short piece of writing, every syllable counts and that word limits are there to improve their prose style (and not, as they sometimes think, to alleviate the teacher’s marking burden).

Recreative writing based on texts such as ‘The Unexpected’ can sometimes take the form of an ‘updating’ of the original. Not only does this allow students to explore the desires and anxieties of their own generation, it obliges them to do so through the lens of another. Put more squarely into exam-speak: it requires them to ‘relate texts to their social, cultural and historical contexts’. This aspect of GCSE English Literature can often prove taxing for teachers, tedious for learners and exasperating for examiners. Examiner reports quite rightly criticize the broad generalizations about ‘patriarchal society’, trotted out to meet the requirements of AO4, often regardless of whether the society in question is Shakespeare’s or Steinbeck’s. Yet our students’ shortcomings in this area are by no means entirely of their own making. Pressure of time, a lack of appropriately pitched resources and an over-reliance on ‘one-size-fits-all’ material can all militate against students gaining any first-hand sense of the situatedness of a text.

It goes without saying that showing is preferable to telling when it comes to matters contextual and Chopin’s story provides an excellent opportunity to examine a work in its original material setting. ‘The Unexpected’ first appeared in an issue of Vogue in September 1895. Not
only did my class of teenage girls perk up considerably at the mention of a
fashion magazine (albeit one more than a century behind the times), they
were genuinely intrigued that a text they were reading as part of their
literature programme had started out in such a journal. Chopin’s story
takes up a little over one page of the magazine, and is accompanied by a
stylish six-drawing cartoon of a fashionably dressed woman, reading while
seated in a park, who is confronted by a rather comic looking tiger; she
feeds him a pack of gum and makes her escape as the beast struggles to
un-stick his jaws. Verging on the surreal, the cartoon strip puts the title of
the story into a quirkily comic framework, raising questions for students
about how far illustration colours the way a narrative is read and
interpreted.

Moving on from the story’s immediate context, students also surveyed
the front cover of the edition in which it appeared. Vogue covers of the
1890s featured images of two seated female figures on either side of the
heading; one is engrossed in fixing her hair in front of a hand mirror, the
other is engrossed in reading—a double perspective which invites
students to evaluate the journal’s stance on the role of women in society.
Below this standard header is the individual image for the week. In the
issue carrying ‘The Unexpected’, it depicts two women talking together on
a park bench; one is conventionally dressed, the other wears the collar
and tie of the New Woman. At the foot of the page, the following snippet
of script appears:

ONE: ‘Would you marry for love or for money?’
THE OTHER: ‘I would love to marry for money.’

As the speakers are not identified, students have to make up their own
minds as to who delivers the subversive shift of noun to verb—highly
pertinent for Chopin’s story, of course. Looking further into the volume,
we come across an article on ‘Winter cycling gowns and silver-mounted
bicycles’, which puts Dorothea’s escape into the countryside on her
‘wheel’ vividly into context. While accessing an 1890s issue of Vogue was
fairly labour-intensive, the effort paid dividends. By looking closely at just
a few of its pages, students acquired first-hand knowledge of periodical
fiction, fin-de-siècle feminism and the early years of an iconic publication
still flourishing today.

Teaching at key stage 4 and 5 involves managing courses that can often
feel over-weighted, both with skills and content, while increased
emphasis on comparison (often to no convincing end) has meant that it is
a relative rarity for students to concentrate for any stretch of time on a single text. At a time when English teachers wait with baited breath for the reforms of GCSE and A-level, those of us charged with making sure that Year 9 pupils are ready to meet the changes, should set time aside for the short story, confident that less can sometimes be more.

References


2. Kate Chopin (1895), ‘The Unexpected’, in *Vogue* (Sept 19, 1895), 180-1. The *Vogue* archive can be accessed through the ProQuest database (subscription only). Front covers of 1890s *Vogue* are available free on Google Images.