

Augusto Monterroso (1921-2003; Honduras/Guatemala) was known for his wit and the brevity of many of his stories.

Augusto Monterroso, “The Frog Who Wanted to Be an Authentic Frog”

There was once a frog who wanted to be a real frog, and every day she struggled to be so. First she bought a mirror into which she gazed for hours hoping to see her longed-for authenticity. Sometimes she thought she’d found it and sometimes she did not, depending on the mood of that day or hour, until she grew tired of this and put the mirror away in a trunk.

Finally she thought that the only way to be sure of her own worth was through the opinion of others, and she began to do her hair and to dress up and undress (when she had no other option) to see if others approved of her and recognized that she was a real frog.

One day she noticed that what they most admired about her was her body, especially her legs, so she started to do squats and jumps in order to have to better legs, and she felt that everyone applauded her.

And so she continued to push herself harder and harder, and was willing to go to any length to get others to consider her to be a real frog, she even allowed her thighs to be ripped off for others to eat, and as the others devoured them she was still able to hear bitterly when they said, “Excellent frog. Tastes just like chicken.”

(Translated by John Lyons)

1. What is the message of this story?
2. How is the message conveyed?
3. How does the story compare to an Aesop fable?

Augusto Monterroso, “The Eclipse”

When Brother Bartolomé Arrazola felt that he was lost, he accepted the fact that now nothing could save him. The powerful jungle of Guatemala, implacable and final, had overwhelmed him. In the face of his topographical ignorance, he sat down calmly to wait for death. He wanted to die there, without hope, alone, his thoughts fixed on distant Spain, particularly on the Convent of Los Abrojos, where Charles V had once condescended to come down from his eminence to tell him that he trusted in the religious zeal of his work of redemption. When he awoke, he found himself surrounded by a group of Indians with impassive faces who were preparing to sacrifice him before an altar, an altar that seemed to Bartolomé the bed on which he would finally rest from his fears, from his destiny, from himself. Three years in the country had given him a passing knowledge of the native languages. He tried something. He spoke a few words that were understood. Then there blossomed in him an idea that he considered worthy of his talent and his broad education and his profound knowledge of Aristotle. He remembered that a total eclipse of the sun was to take place that day. And he decided, in the deepest part of his being, to use that knowledge to deceive his oppressors and save his life. “If you kill me,” he said, “I can make the sun darken on high.” The Indians stared at him and Bartolome caught the disbelief in their eyes. He saw them consult one another and he waited confidently, not without a certain contempt.

Two hours later the heart of Brother Bartolomé Arrazola spurted out its passionate blood on the sacrificing stone (brilliant in the opaque light of the eclipsed sun) while one of the Indians recited tonelessly, slowly, one by one, the infinite list of dates when solar and lunar eclipses would take place, which the astronomers of the Mayan community had predicted and registered in their codices without the estimable help of Aristotle.

(Translated by Edith Grossman)

1. What is the narrator’s style in this story?
2. What is the message here?
3. How does the story present its argument?

Marco Denevi (1922-1998; Argentina) was a lawyer, journalist and short story writer.

Marco Denevi, “The Lord of the Flies”

The flies imagined their god. It was also a fly. The lord of the flies was a fly, now green, now black and gold, now pink, now white, now purple, an inconceivable fly, a beautiful fly, a monstrous fly, a terrible fly, a benevolent fly, a vengeful fly, a just fly, a youthful fly, but always a fly. Some embellished his size so that he was compared to an ox, others imagined him to be so small that you couldn't see him. In some religions, he was missing wings (“He flies,” they argued, “but he doesn't need wings.”) while in others he had infinite wings. Here it was said he had antennae like horns, and there that he had eyes that surrounded his entire head. For some he buzzed constantly, and for others he was mute, but he could communicate just the same. And for everyone, when flies died, he took them up to paradise. Paradise was a hunk of rotten meat, stinking and putrid, that souls of the dead flies could gnaw on for an eternity without devouring it; yes, this heavenly scrap of refuse would be constantly reborn and regenerated under the swarm of flies. For the good flies. Because there were also bad flies, and for them there was a hell. The hell for condemned flies was a place without excrement, without waste, trash, stink, without anything of anything; a place sparkling with cleanliness and illuminated by a bright white light; in other words, an ungodly place.

1. What is this story about?
2. Is there are overriding theme?
3. How does the author employ symbolism?

Marco Denevi, “Apocalypse”

The extinction of the human race took place, approximately, by the late thirty-second century. It happened like this: The machines had reached such perfection that men and women did not need to eat or to sleep, to talk or to read, to write or to think... or to do anything. They only had to press a button and the machines did everything for them. Gradually, things started to disappear... tables, chairs, roses, disks with the nine symphonies of Beethoven, antique shops, the wines from Bordeaux, Flemish tapestries, all of Verdi's operas, chess, telescopes, Gothic cathedrals, football stadiums, the *Pietà* of Michelangelo, the ruins of Trajan's Forum, automobiles, rice, giant sequoias, the Parthenon. There were only machines. Then, in August, people began to notice they too were gradually disappearing ... while the machines were multiplying. It didn't take long for the number of men to become less than half while the machines doubled. The machines eventually occupied all available spaces. ... No one could take a step or make a gesture without tripping over them. Finally, human beings were eliminated. As they forgot to unplug the machines, we continue to operate.

1. What is the most striking feature of this story?
2. What are the major stylistic elements of the story? That is, how is it constructed?
3. Is the theme of the story viable for the twenty-first century?

Mark Twain (1835-1910), "The Story of the Bad Little Boy"

Once there was a bad little boy whose name was Jim - though, if you will notice, you will find that bad little boys are nearly always called James in your Sunday-school books. It was strange, but still it was true that this one was called Jim.

He didn't have any sick mother either - a sick mother who was pious and had the consumption, and would be glad to lie down in the grave and be at rest but for the strong love she bore her boy, and the anxiety she felt that the world might be harsh and cold towards him when she was gone. Most bad boys in the Sunday-books are named James, and have sick mothers, who teach them to say, "Now, I lay me down," etc. and sing them to sleep with sweet, plaintive voices, and then kiss them good-night, and kneel down by the bedside and weep. But it was different with this fellow. He was named Jim, and there wasn't anything the matter with his mother - no consumption, nor anything of that kind. She was rather stout than otherwise, and she was not pious; moreover, she was not anxious on Jim's account. She said if he were to break his neck it wouldn't be much loss. She always spanked Jim to sleep, and she never kissed him good-night; on the contrary, she boxed his ears when she was ready to leave him.

Once this little bad boy stole the key of the pantry, and slipped in there and helped himself to some jam, and filled up the vessel with tar, so that his mother would never know the difference; but all at once a terrible feeling didn't come over him, and something didn't seem to whisper to him, "Is it right to disobey my mother? Isn't it sinful to do this? Where do bad little boys go who gobble up their good kind mother's jam?" and then he didn't kneel down all alone and promise never to be wicked any more, and rise up with a light, happy heart, and go and tell his mother all about it, and beg her forgiveness, and be blessed by her with tears of pride and thankfulness in her eyes. No; that is the way with all other bad boys in the books; but it happened otherwise with this Jim, strangely enough. He ate that jam, and said it was bully, in his sinful, vulgar way; and he put in the tar, and said that was bully also, and laughed, and observed "that the old woman would get up and snort" when she found it out; and when she did find it out, he denied knowing anything about it, and she whipped him severely, and he did the crying himself. Everything about this boy was curious - everything turned out differently with him from the way it does to the bad James in the books.

Once he climbed up in Farmer Acorn's apple-tree to steal apples, and the limb didn't break, and he didn't fall and break his arm, and get torn by the farmer's great dog, and then languish on a sick bed for weeks, and repent and become good. Oh! no; he stole as many apples as he wanted and came down all right; and he was all ready for the dog too, and knocked him endways with a brick when he came to tear him. It was very strange - nothing like it ever happened in those mild little books with marbled backs, and with pictures in them of men with swallow-tailed coats and bell-crowned hats, and pantaloons that are short in the legs, and women with the waists of their dresses under their arms, and no hoops on. Nothing like it in any of the Sunday-school books.

Once he stole the teacher's pen-knife, and, when he was afraid it would be found out and he would get whipped, he slipped it into George Wilson's cap - poor Widow Wilson's son, the moral boy, the good little boy of the village, who always obeyed his mother, and never told an untruth, and was fond of his lessons, and infatuated with Sunday-school. And when the knife dropped from the cap, and poor George hung his head and blushed, as if in conscious guilt, and the grieved teacher charged the theft upon him, and was just in the very act of bringing the switch down upon his trembling shoulders, a white-haired improbable justice of the peace did not suddenly appear in their midst, and strike an attitude and say, "Spare this noble boy - there stands the cowering culprit! I was passing the school-door at recess, and unseen myself, I saw the theft committed!" And then Jim didn't get whaled, and the venerable justice didn't read the tearful school a homily and take George by the hand and say such a boy deserved to be exalted, and then tell him to come and make his home with him, and sweep out the office, and make fires, and run errands, and chop wood, and study law, and help his wife to do household labors, and have all the balance of the time to play, and get forty cents a month, and be happy. No; it would have happened that way in the books, but it didn't happen that way to Jim. No meddling old clam of a justice dropped in to make trouble, and so the model boy George got thrashed, and Jim was glad of it because, you know, Jim hated moral boys. Jim said he was "down on them milk-sops." Such was the coarse language of this bad, neglected boy.

But the strangest thing that ever happened to Jim was the time he went boating on Sunday, and didn't get drowned, and that other time that he got caught out in the storm when he was fishing on Sunday, and didn't get struck by lightning. Why, you might look, and look, all through the Sunday-school books from now till next Christmas, and you would never come across anything like this. Oh no; you would find that all the bad boys who go boating on Sunday invariably get drowned; and all the bad boys who get caught out in storms when they are fishing on Sunday

infallibly get struck by lightning. Boats with bad boys in them always upset on Sunday, and it always storms when bad boys go fishing on the Sabbath. How this Jim ever escaped is a mystery to me.

This Jim bore a charmed life - that must have been the way of it. Nothing could hurt him. He even gave the elephant in the menagerie a plug of tobacco, and the elephant didn't knock the top of his head off with his trunk. He browsed around the cupboard after essence of peppermint, and didn't make a mistake and drink aqua fortis. He stole his father's gun and went hunting on the Sabbath, and didn't shoot three or four of his fingers off. He struck his little sister on the temple with his fist when he was angry, and she didn't linger in pain through long summer days, and die with sweet words of forgiveness upon her lips that redoubled the anguish of his breaking heart. No; she got over it. He ran off and went to sea at last, and didn't come back and find himself sad and alone in the world, his loved ones sleeping in the quiet churchyard, and the vine-embowered home of his boyhood tumbled down and gone to decay. Ah! no; he came home as drunk as a piper, and got into the station-house the first thing.

And he grew up and married, and raised a large family, and brained them all with an axe one night, and got wealthy by all manner of cheating and rascality; and now he is the infernalesst wickedest scoundrel in his native village, and is universally respected, and belongs to the Legislature.

So you see there never was a bad James in the Sunday-school books that had such a streak of luck as this sinful Jim with the charmed life.

1. What is the tone of the story?
2. How does Twain structure the story?
3. How does the narrator present the material?
4. How could one describe the particular type of humor employed in the story?
5. What is the theme or message of the story?
6. Are there points of contact among the five stories in the selection?
7. Do the selections seem to make a common statement about the genre of the short story?

