One of literature’s memorable semiotic moments occurs in Stephen Crane’s classic short story, “The Open Boat.” The desperate men in the lifeboat see a speck on the distant shore. Eventually the speck becomes a man. He is waving his arms at the crew. Relief! Rescue at last? No, it appears that the man is only giving them a friendly hail, misreading their condition as they misread his signal. This chapter is about other semiotic moments, some of them in “Shiloh” by Bobbie Ann Mason, some of them in the history of short fiction theory.

“But genre criticism . . . Isn’t it—dead?” I often hear those words (or get that look) when I say I am interested in the short story. Truly, it is too late to ask, “What is a short story?” Instead, I’ve been asking, “What is storyness?” In 1982, the same year Bobbie Ann Mason published “Shiloh” in a collection, a psychologist I’ve mentioned before, William F. Brewer, offered one answer. He challenged both story grammars and plan-based comprehension models, saying that neither was truly specific to the experience of reading “stories.” Having an understanding of both literary and rhetorical theory, he knew that discourse has to be understood in the context of its function or purpose. So he claimed that stories are a class of narratives meant to entertain, and he developed experiments for testing the arousal, intensification, and release (or resolution) of three affects within readers: surprise, suspense, and curiosity. Brewer was trying to anatomize story processing, trying to determine its stages: the sequence of its cognitive strategies and affective states. He was interested in the way
readers determine the “storyness” of stories and wanted to test empirically for this intuition.

I share that goal, although my principles and methods are different. He was looking for serialized affect; I am looking for serialized closure. The searches may be related, but they differ crucially in the nature and uses of the findings. What I am doing is putting readers in a position to activate the cognitive strategies associated with story processing—strategies that psychologists like Brewer have identified—and I am then recording the evidence that those processes have happened. Preclosure choices are exceptionally rich evidence because they reveal not only affective responses to a text but also the operation of internalized narrative schemata.

There are many ways a literary critic might use the raw data, but my method has been to recode the putative stories in terms of story types, those fictional scripts supplied by tradition. Doing so has proven to be a valuable first step toward an objective about which the scientist doesn’t care but the literary critic does: the reinterpretation and reevaluation of a text worth the effort. On a number of occasions, I’ve used preclosure analysis to challenge, or at least postpone, ideological readings of short stories that are laden with social messages. Are there times, however, when social history is exactly what preclosure highlights? When it comes to today’s interest in cultural study, is it goodbye that I’m waving—or hello? “Shiloh” is a good place to be when that question is asked.

Mason’s well-known story is about the impending breakup of a marriage. Leroy and Norma Jean Moffitt live in Kentucky. Like so many characters in the Raymond Carver tradition of storytelling, Leroy is between jobs. He had been a truck driver, but he had an accident four months ago, and since then he has been staying at home. His wife works at the cosmetic counter in a Rexall drugstore, but she has begun a series of self-improvement activities: a class in body building and then a class in English composition. A restlessness that Leroy cannot understand seems to be driving her, and he knows intuitively that he will lose her. Meanwhile, he smokes pot; goes through an endless series of kitschy craft kits; tries to grasp what is happening to himself, Norma Jean, and their marriage; and focuses on the project of building a life-size “Lincoln Logs” cabin. He wants to build something meaningful, a “real home.”

There are many reasons for the malaise of these characters. The rural past has slipped over the horizon while the national chain stores, the pop culture of television, and the new suburbia dominate the inner and outer
landscape. For the Moffitts personally, there is one tragic memory: the loss of their only child to sudden infant death syndrome. The pain and guilt seem harder to bury now that Leroy does not travel anymore and the Moffitts see more of each other. In fact, Norma Jean is having a hard time adjusting to her husband’s return. Like Leroy’s building projects, her self-improvement classes are a symptom. Both characters are trying to deal with change and are looking for self-validation in ways that may be banal or comic; however, they are also painfully confused and searching, a state as close to profound as anyone can reach in a world of Rexall drugstores and Donahue segments.

Leroy’s mother-in-law suggests that he take his wife on a trip to Shiloh. Her own marriage took place in the nearby town of Corinth, and she remembers visiting Shiloh the next day. She is clearly a woman of the past, the kind who is shocked to discover her daughter smoking a cigarette—not because of the health risk but because nice girls do not do such things. Nor do they get pregnant before marriage, as Norma Jean did, nor do they lose their babies unaccountably. It is no surprise that the pressure is building up in Norma Jean. She is trapped between a do-nothing husband and a disapproving mother. The trip to Shiloh brings all these tensions to a head. As they sit on the ground near the graveyard, Norma Jean tells Leroy she wants to leave him, and Leroy has to face some truths about himself. He thinks about changing. At the end, Norma Jean has walked off to a bluff overlooking the river, and Leroy gets up to follow her. He is hobbling on one leg that still hurts from the old injury and one leg that went to sleep under him as he sat. Mason does not like showy symbols, but Leroy is walking on a meaningful pair of legs. They are unsteady, but they are moving.

The reader experiment on “Shiloh” was conducted in an undergraduate class on the short story, which I taught at the University of Iowa. There were thirty-six students in the class, twenty-three women and thirteen men. Twenty-four were seniors, eleven were juniors, and one was a sophomore. Four said they had studied Mason in another course, nineteen had read the story before, twelve simply recognized the title, and one had never heard of it.

The mix of students wasn’t ideal, and the degree of prior familiarity was greater than expected. It is also true that the women greatly outnumbered the men. Like most undergraduate classes at Iowa, it looked very white and middle class, although, if one could rate the socioeconomic
status of the parents, one would probably find a wide gap between the lowest and the highest. By any standard, and certainly by any scientific gauge, it was an imperfect sample. The biggest liability was that many students had read the story before. Unfortunately, their preclosure choices might be influenced by some memory of the actual closure. On the other hand, knowing the story, they could concentrate on the experiment itself.

Two texts of “Shiloh” were prepared. As usual, the sentences were serially numbered (1 to 476), and again, paragraph and section breaks were completely eliminated. Each story text was prefaced by a different quotation from Lila Havens’s interview with Mason at the University of Houston on February 19, 1984, two years after the story came out in a collection. One quotation begins: “Right now I’m generally more interested in the cultural effects on men than I am the women characters in my stories because women are in an incredible position right now.” The other begins: “[M]y larger concerns are tending, I think, toward a strong curiosity about the sympathy for the lower classes.” One quotation foregrounds gender issues; the otherforegrounds class distinctions. About half the students got text A; the others got text B.

Readers were asked to list up to five preclosure points, starting with the one closest to the end of the story and working back toward the beginning. All in all, the group identified thirty different sentences. These were quickly reduced to five target sentences, which clearly stood out as the favorite choices. Each one had been picked by at least 20 percent of the readers, and no other sentences were noticed by more than 14 percent of the readers. These were the five points where storyness became apparent, marking off five putative stories on the way to the end of the actual story. Although no one reader processed the story in exactly these stages, the distributed reader favored this pattern.

The earliest target sentence occurs halfway through the story. Leroy has found his wife crying because her mother caught her smoking. Trying to cheer her up, he suggests that she play a tune on the organ he bought her for Christmas. During a break in the music, he asks her what she is thinking. When she says, “about what?” his mind is already a blank. But then

S/242  [He] has the sudden impulse to tell Norma Jean about himself, as if he had just met her.

S/243  They have known each other so long that they have forgotten a lot about each other.
They could become reacquainted.

But when the oven timer goes off and she runs to the kitchen, he forgets why he wants to do this. (9)

Cut. This sentence was probably chosen as a preclosure point because it is followed by a time shift to the next day. That is a very strong cue from the author, and a rather mechanical one, at that. But still, up to that point, the narrative segment has emphasized that Leroy’s sense of meaning and direction in his life, and specifically in his marriage, is at risk. How can he regain or preserve well-being? The plan—however hazily formulated—is for Leroy and his wife to get acquainted again, to start over in their marriage. By now, however, we know that Norma Jean has begun to make over her own life without Leroy’s help. He wants to build a new home; she wants to go to night school.

The main obstacle to his plan right now is not Norma Jean’s separateness; it is his own inability to focus and persist. He is neutralized by confusion and inertia. Is there an outcome here? If so, it is the unenlightened maintenance of the status quo. Though not a dramatic ending, storyness is achieved: a marriage is at risk; the husband has a plan for saving it; he does not act, so the opportunity’s lost. The essential qualities of the story are ordinary people, a low-keyed plot, an anticlimactic ending, and a marriage slowly disintegrating in western Kentucky in the 1970s. We know what we’ve got here. It used to be called a slice-of-life story.

Mabel, the mother-in-law, drops by. As usual, she has a negative effect on her daughter’s confidence and composure. She retells a news story about a baby who died in an accident, and Norma Jean feels a pointed allusion to her own tragedy and her culpability. Later, as Leroy thinks about getting a truckload of notched logs for his dream house, Norma Jean diagrams paragraphs at the kitchen table.

Norma Jean is miles away.

He knows he is going to lose her.

Like Mabel, he is just waiting for time to pass. (11)

Cut. Again, the break comes just before a time shift. But, again, we can look with interest at a newly bracketed segment of narrative, one that incorporates the first putative story but now extends to a new insight about the future of the marriage—or, rather, its demise. Now the narrative shows
two characters whose self-assurance and self-esteem are at risk. Norma Jean feels threatened by her mother’s disapproval, and Leroy feels threatened by Norma Jean’s new interests. Even for Norma Jean, the goal seems to be merely to fill time (she says night school is “something to do”).

Husband and wife sit looking out at the bird feeder; they sit working at the kitchen table. Leroy has been thinking, “Norma Jean is miles away.” There is nothing new about that realization. A period and a space and then: “He knows he is going to lose her.” Something is very new here. Leroy has grasped that the status quo is doomed. That is the segue into the preclosure point: “Like Mabel, he is just waiting for time to pass.” What is Mabel waiting for? She is old; she is waiting for death, the ultimate change in the status quo. In this putative story, little has happened, but much has been realized. The narrative up to this point is a dawn-of-recognition story.

We arrive now at the most interesting preclosure point in the experiment. Mabel has suggested a cure for the marriage: a trip to the Confederate graveyard at Shiloh, the site of one of the bloodiest conflicts of the Civil War. Although the South might have won, the army was routed in the end by the Northern invaders. Furthermore, Norma Jean has told Leroy that her name invokes not only Marilyn Monroe but the Norman invaders who conquered the Saxons (Southerners?). The trip is on, the drive over to Tennessee is mostly silent, and the first impressions of the park are mixed. Husband and wife look at the log cabin with the bullet hole in it.

S/389 “That’s not the kind of log house I’ve got in mind,” says Leroy apologetically.
S/390 “I know that.”
S/391 “This is a pretty place.
S/392 Your mama was right.”
S/394 “Well, we’ve seen it.
S/395 I hope she’s satisfied.”
S/396 They burst out laughing together. (14)

Cut. This is an unusual target sentence for a number of reasons. First of all, it is not followed by a big jump in time or venue, but only by a seamless shift to a few moments later. It is the shortest target sentence and
the one with the most active main verb and the most specific, concrete action. It has the lowest incidence of lexical and syntactic patterning except for the dramatic example of redundancy and bracketing: the sentence begins with *They* and ends with *together*. This strategy is appropriate because this is the only sentence showing the man and wife in perfect synchrony, mentally and physically. It is also the only target sentence chosen only by women.

Once I realized this gender bias, I looked to see which text these women had been reading. The overwhelming majority of them—86 percent—had been reading text A, the one with the gender-focused heading. Given the nature of the sample, it is impossible to answer definitively any of the questions that leap to mind. But let’s ask them anyway. Was the gender bias in favor of this preclosure point caused by the content and/or form of the sentence itself, by the kind of storyness found in the narrative segment up to this point, or by the prominence of gender issues in the heading, or (as I believe) a combination of all these factors? Perhaps, instead of asking why women favored this point, we should ask why men ignored it. Designing the kind of experiment that will test for clearer answers to these questions is a project, I hope, for a literary scholar rather than a psychologist.

But, getting back to the inquiry at hand, what kind of story ends with this burst of laughter? Looking at the whole text up to this point, we can say it has been leading to the visit to Shiloh. However, Mabel is the one who always wanted to make this trip and then wanted her daughter and son-in-law to go. She is the one who sees it as a “second honeymoon,” a restorative for the marriage. Leroy simply latches onto this hope, adopting the plan as his own. But it never has been, and never will be, what Norma Jean wants. That is the truth she is capturing when she says, “Well, we’ve seen it. I hope she’s satisfied!” It is a funny line, but it reminds us that the marriage itself was originally Mabel’s idea, the only option she could imagine for a pregnant teenage daughter. Norma Jean’s quip is almost a throwaway line, and yet it is the one moment in the entire narrative when the husband and wife communicate perfectly. They have exactly the same spontaneous reaction to the Mabelness in their lives.

Of all the putative stories, the one that ends here is the most hopeful, the most promising for the future of these two fictional characters. We say to ourselves, “Now, if they could just build on this moment. If they could just realize they have to define their own journey instead of retracing...
Mabel’s.” Is this wishful thinking? Do we know this kind of story, the kind that dangles a happy ending in front of hopeful sentimentalists? We saw a fleeting variant of it in Cortázar’s portrait of a failed husband. What layers of conditioning would be revealed if I called this a “woman’s” story? That term is the trade label for the “love interest” story favored by slick women’s magazines, but let’s just call it a genre story.

The downbeat follows. The next target sentence is blunt and painful. “Without looking at Leroy, she says, ‘I want to leave you’” (14). There is no change of time or venue after this sentence. Its preclosure power is self-contained. There are instances of double and triple repetition on the level of a single letter (i.e., alliteration), and the sentence contains two keywords (i.e., two words that link up forcefully with the story so far): Leroy and want. The sentence also has the single most definite closure word in any of the target sentences: leave.

By this point, Leroy and Norma Jean have had their tour of Shiloh and their picnic. Leroy has commented on the battle of April 7, 1862, but

S/406 They both know that he doesn’t know any history.
S/407 He is just talking about some of the historical plaques they have read.
S/411 They sit in silence and stare at the cemetery for the Union dead . . .
S/413 Norma Jean wads up the cake wrapper and squeezes it tightly in her hand.
S/414 Without looking at Leroy, she says, “I want to leave you.” (14)

What is at risk in the story we have just marked off is a last chance for renewal—rededication—maybe through an encounter with the larger human history memorialized at Shiloh. But Leroy does not know any history. He cannot make a connection. We do not know whether Norma Jean can, but certainly from a feminist perspective, she does win this Battle of Shiloh. She takes a real step toward personal authority and freedom. Even though the narrative is told from Leroy’s point of view, so that we sympathize more with his loss than with her gain, suddenly the story seems more hers than his. She has taken charge of it. What kind of story is this? Leroy would call it a “woman’s lib” story. We shall call it a message story.

The last of the putative stories ends with Leroy trying to grasp what is
happening and recognizing the limits of his understanding. Efforts to focus on the battle of 1862 lead to a dazed synopsis of personal history:

S/455 The next day [after they were married], Mabel and Jet visited the battleground, and then Norma Jean was born, and then she married Leroy.

S/456 Leroy knows he is leaving out a lot.

S/457 He is leaving out the insides of history.

S/459 It occurs to him that building a house out of logs is similarly empty—too simple.

S/460 And the real inner workings of a marriage, like most of history, have escaped him. (16)

Cut. At first, this looks like another dawn-of-recognition story, with the pathos underlined by the relegation of Leroy to the object position: something “occurs to him”; something has “escaped him.” Whose fault is it that he has failed to understand the “inner workings” of both public and private history? It is a cultural liability as much as a personal one, and Norma Jean has the advantage only because she is more in synch with the times, not because she is made of finer stuff. She has had her revelation that she can no longer live under the terms set for her when she was eighteen, and now Leroy has his: that he has missed the point. What is at risk in the story that ends here is neither the marriage itself (that is almost certainly forfeited) nor Norma Jean’s ability to restart her life (she is well on the way to doing that). What is at stake is Leroy’s improvement as a processor of experience.

In those terms, the outcome is positive. He has learned something about his limitations as a human being. But they are the limitations of many Americans—perhaps mostly male—who were infantilized by old myths of open-road adventure, log-cabin romance, and dreams of “settling down” in a “real home” with “the woman [they loved].” What has escaped Leroy are the changes in the country since the 1950s; they flashed by the windows of his truck, but now that he has stopped moving, he is parked in the midst of them. The voice we hear at the end of this putative story is almost a choral one, the lament of a generation, a class, a gender—or one part of it that got broadsided by the postmodern world. It is a socio-graphic story.

Yet Mason does not stop there. Leroy keeps hoping. “He’ll have to
think of something else, quickly.” He even tells himself “he’ll get moving again” (16). But, as I mentioned earlier, his legs are not functioning very well as he stands and tries to follow Norma Jean, who has walked toward the river. “Norma Jean has reached the bluff, and she is looking out over the Tennessee River. Now she turns toward Leroy and waves her arms. Is she beckoning to him? She seems to be doing an exercise for her chest muscles” (16).

This is another semiotic moment. Is she beckoning and perhaps re-including him in her life? Or is she exercising her “chest muscles” (a neutering of the female breast), signaling her independence, and thereby re-excluding him from her life? But what if this binary code is itself the trap? What if Leroy’s only chance is to accept the ambiguity of her signal: the chance that it might mean either, both, or none of the above? The next sentence is the last one in the text, in other words, the actual closure point:

S/476 The sky is unusually pale—the color of the dust ruffle
Mabel made for their bed. (16)

The dust ruffle is beige, bourgeois, Mabel-made, and suggests that the marriage, tagged by such an image, is a sham, too. On the other hand, if we give Leroy even the tiniest bit of credit for making the analogy—perhaps even for intuiting its message—we must give him far more credit than we have ever given him before. In the end, “Shiloh” is about learning to look more sensitively at the signs and signals that communicate meaning. It is a postmodern story not because it depicts a society without depth or structure (although it does that) but because it shows that the slipperiness of the sign is a function not of misinterpretation (as in “The Open Boat”) but of optimized interpretation.

The move to closure is a march to Shiloh, site of a historic drama of missed signals, changing fortunes, and civil trauma. We have moved through five putative stories on our way through the actual story, and of course this staged reading has been, in a sense, rigged. That is to say, we cannot prove any one reader divided the story this way, although it is possible one could have. Rather, we can say that the distributed reader, on this particular occasion, tended to do so. As I’ve done throughout this book, I’ve characterized the putative stories in terms of conventional types or sub-genres of the short story: a slice-of-life story, a dawn-of-recognition story, a genre story, a message story, a sociographic story, a postmodern story.
I do not want to argue for any one of these labels in particular, nor do I want to suggest that Mason has given us an anthology of story types. But I do want to appreciate the extent to which her “new” story is empowered by “old” formulas of storyness. Recognizing the play of storyness over the story named “Shiloh” not only reveals a conservative deep structure but also brings into relief the cultural scripts (represented as clichéd story types) embedded in the discourse. They supply a richness of signification at odds with the plainness of the language, the apparent thinness and triviality of the cultural envelope, the deliberate “flattening” of the characters: in short, the story’s minimalism.

The structuralists may have been the last to believe in a text “filled” with a meaning the reader decoded. Since then, we have been encouraged to view the text as, in a sense, “empty,” waiting to be filled or constructed or deconstructed by an agent who is no longer a person with a coherent, centered individuality—who, in short, can no longer be addressed as a reader much less the reader. I have been trying, once again, to “fill” the text, this time by means of the text-processing experience itself, and to reinvent the reader as a human processor—the distributed reader—who comes into being through the differential acts of individually identifiable human beings but who is not identified as any one of them.

Preclosure study is not the only arena for the kind of literary empiricism I have been describing, but it is a natural segue from the 1980s work on closure in short fiction theory. It has the advantage of turning intuitive judgments into quantifiable data, which can, in turn, be analyzed from a number of critical perspectives, ranging from the more conservative genre interests I have espoused here to the more fashionable interests in political and cultural textuality. And I am now, myself, nearing the end of a chapter—a place from which I turn and wave back. Are preclosure studies just a hopeful effort to save genre theory in the new millennium? Or do they presage the end of literary study, its gradual co-option by politics or the soft sciences? The message is what you think it is.