

THE NATURE OF THE SHORT STORY: ATTEMPTS AT DEFINITION

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Abstract

This article focuses on the way in which critical approaches “explain” why and how the short story has come to be regarded by some as the most accomplished literary form of the 20th century and by others as the “Cinderella of fiction”.

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Introduction

As a kick-off observation, in discussing short story theory, it is often difficult to understand what it is critics are disagreeing about. The two essential things needed for any intellectual endeavour seem to be lacking: an accepted set of procedures for conducting the investigations and attempting to come to conclusions and, a consequence of the first, an ability to build in concert upon different people’s findings in some sort of cumulative way. We are also aware of the no longer recent trend towards a skepticism and a nominalism which doubt not only the possibility of language ever describing reality but also the possibility of knowledge of reality itself. We do not believe, however, that this trend aims at the destruction of intellectual discipline; on the contrary, while aiming at a thorough questioning of our assumptions and procedures, it does so with a view to finding some more accurate way of building knowledge.

If we were to try and isolate some of the specific qualities and effects of the short story, we would begin by arguing that it provides or makes for a kind of experience for the reader which is quite different from that which one gains from the novel.

The difference between those critics and writers who doubt that an all-including definition of the short story is possible and those who argue for such a definition revolves around two different concepts of generic definition. The first group insists on a positivist definition that includes characteristics common to all examples of the short story that will sufficiently distinguish it from the novel. The other group, instead of trying to find exclusionary characteristics common to all hypothetical examples of the form, is interested in locating a network of similarities and relationships within examples of the form. As long as they can find some characteristics that are shared by hypothetical examples of the short story, they do not need to find a definition that satisfies necessary and sufficient conditions to

distinguish story from novel. These critics believe that as long as prototypical members of the genre have a high degree of resemblances to each other, such a group of resemblances are useful for the interpretation of individual members of the genre, for discussion of the historical development of the genre, and for heuristic discussion of the epistemological and aesthetic implications of these characteristics.

Historical vs. theoretical definitions

Many of the difficulties in defining the short story can be traced to two basic problems: one historical, the other theoretical. The former arises from the attempt of early critics to distinguish the short story from any mere story that was short. Poe's insistence on a "unified effect" describes, or rather prescribes, a quality which became the first conceptual wedge to split off the genre by something other than shortness. Brander Matthews made the split explicit by putting a hyphen between "short" and "story" and ruling out the sketch, the still life.

The fact is that "unity of effect" can be rather nebulous and hard to use as a measuring stick. And Matthews' insistence that the "Short-story" have a plot did not stand up well in the early 20th century, when everybody – the short story writer in particular – was trying to get rid of plot. The hyphen has disappeared along with the definition, but the concept of short story has remained, albeit agreement as to what it is.

In contrast to the skeptics about generic characteristics of the short story, there are critics who believe that either the shortness of the short story or its historical traditions, or both, have resulted in properties of the short story that distinguish it from the novel. Poe was, of course, the first to make this case; and indeed, the case he makes depends on both the issue of length and the issue of historical ancestry. First of all, when Poe referred to the short prose tale – which he claimed was different from and superior to long narrative – he meant short fiction within the tradition of the romance, a form which, regardless of length, all critics agree, is different in content and conventions from the novel. Furthermore, Poe's notion of unity and singleness of effect was indebted to the kind of transformations being worked on the romance, fairy tale, folktale form by the German romantics. The theories on the novella by Goethe, Tieck, and Schlegel were central in influencing Irving, Hawthorne, and Poe's innovations in short fiction.

In the early years of the 20th century, when developments in printing techniques and the rise of a new magazine audience gave the short story an unprecedented popularity, attempts at definition tended to be of the formulaic "how-to" kind. Later, in the heyday of New Criticism, the best commentators on the short story were less interested in definition; they were content with "close readings", analysing individual stories as if they were loosely extended poems.

Post-World War 2 decades witnessed a renewed interest in the theory of the short story. "Frame theory", Todorov on the fantastic, Northrop Frye, structuralism, deconstruction, reader-response criticism, all have left their mark, and even where the criticism is not specifically theoretical, one can see how the writers have been affected by the general critical climate and by the works of avant-garde authors.

Nowadays, despite the flourish of short story criticism, not only the definition but the canon itself is still a matter of dispute, the question of what works are or are not short stories. Hence the difference between those who trace the genre back to Boccaccio, *The Arabian Nights*, and the Bible, and those who would have it begin with Irving or Poe, or still more narrowly, Chekhov or Joyce. Some distinguish between the story and the modern short story; for others, the only kind of short story is the modern.

Genre issues

The second difficulty, theoretical in nature, lies in the ambiguity of the concept of genre itself. Most attempts to define genre confront similar obstacles such as, for instance, the relationship between definition and canon. Which comes first? Efforts to define the short story often run into a chicken & egg problem. We must decide whether we are trying to articulate a concept already intuitively clear by finding terms to mark off this already understood entity or whether we are trying to establish an entirely new category.

Austin Wright (1989) points to the existence of theoretical genres (determined deductively. i.e., through congruence of characteristics derived from a system) and historical genres (discovered through induction, by the observation of an existing body of works or characteristics which are seen to have recurred together: e.g. the modern short story, the lyrical short story, the story of unified effect).

In the same vein, Todorov's (1975) distinction between theoretical and historical genres (essentially the same as Friedman's 1989 deductive vs. inductive genres) is also pertinent in this particular context. One commonsense observation about the short story is that it tends to be more strongly unified than other short prose narrative forms, viz. the parts tend to function in multiple and economical ways, and there is a minimum of waste and arbitrariness. This quality is also called "intensity" and is reflected as such in the strong contemporary critical interest in closure. Intensity is also manifest in the preference in short stories for plots of small magnitude, plots of discovery, static or disclosure plots, Joycean epiphanies; also, in the tendency, especially in modern stories, to leave significant things to inference. Intensity is also evident in the affiliation that critics have noted between the short story and the lyric, as well as the emphasis on metaphor and symbolism. Having said that, what can we do with the formula: A short story is a narrative fiction in prose (story) that is short? One may proceed either inductively or deductively. The first approach fits the evidence to the definition, whereas the second fits the definition to the evidence.

The most completely inductive study of the short story that we know of is Helmut Bonheim's *The Narrative Modes: Techniques of the Short Story* (1982), which is based on an analysis of 600 short stories and 300 novels as a way of testing out short story theories. Bonheim presents his conclusions as tendencies rather than absolutes. With regard to the manner of opening a story, Bonheim finds that techniques of anteriority and the use of pronouns without referents occur more frequently in the short story than in the novel, which simply means that the short story tends to begin close to the end. With regard to endings, he finds these tend to be somewhat more open and tentative. He concludes, however, that no single ingredient of the many proposed short story definitions, other than shortness, can be found in novels as well.

We seem to be left, then, in something of a quandary. Perhaps there is no inherent difference, other than the external factor of length, between the short story, the novella, and the novel. Or, perhaps, the differences have to be seen as a matter of degree rather than of kind.

On the other hand, there are certain other scholars – Mary Rohrberger, Valerie Shaw, Charles May – whose approach is deductive; they assume that the short story has a characteristic subject matter which in turn calls forth a characteristic structure, or the other way round. The problem with this procedure is that it mixes the categories. These critics derive their views, with modifications, from Poe's theories of the short story being read at one sitting and the lyric being the only true form of poetry, and from Frank O'Connor's concept of loneliness in the short story. They are also indebted to the traditional distinction between romance and realism.

Mary Rohrberger (1982) is an example in case. For her, the short story belongs to the tradition of romance, which in turn leads to the modernist tradition of symbolism. Her theory can show that the modern short story has certain period characteristics, such as the reliance upon images and symbols in addition to or instead of a traditional plot, it can also show how it both resembles and differs from the traditional short story, but it cannot show how these traits separate the modern short story from the modern novel or the modern poem since such traits are period traits and not genre traits.

Charles May (1995), has been the most consistent proponent of the deductive approach insisting on an inherent relationship between a characteristic structure and a characteristic theme. He defends the basic proposition that the short story is short because it deals with a special, brief sort of experience (epiphany) and that this experience is most suited to the short story.

In his turn, Anthony Burgess (1984) claims that the difference between story and novel does not have to do with length at all but rather with structure: revelation is characteristic of story, whereas resolution is characteristic of novel. If a novel is based on the former rather than the latter, then it is in reality a short story, and his example is *Ulysses*.

Even the sciences have provided models for differentiation among narrative genres. William O'Rourke considers that the short story is "a micro-form, space-time, exoskeletal phenomenon and can be explained most completely by the intertwining of these metaphors; as in quantum theory, each metaphor needs to be laid atop the others"(O'Rourke,1989: 54). For him, the short story is whole, discrete, intact, three-dimensional, whereas the novel is vertebrate, endoskeletal, two-dimensional; it expands towards all points of a compass, limited only by the size of the frame.

Suzanne Ferguson (1982) finds no single characteristic or cluster of characteristics that can absolutely distinguish the short story from other fictions. She argues that length alone is not a sufficient determiner if all characteristics beside length that may be posited for the short story may also be posited for the novel.

Short story vs. novel

The short story's adjacency to the novel has indeed been one of the central problems in coming to an understanding of the characteristics of the form. Marie Louise Pratt (1994) pushes this issue of "adjacency" to extremes, insisting that the relationship between the novel and the short story is asymmetrical, that the short story is secondary to and dependent on the novel – which is, historically, the dominant, normative genre. Thus, Pratt claims, because the short story cannot be defined except by comparison to the novel it must therefore be dependent on the novel. She offers four propositions (1994: 82), each based on the assumption that bigger is better:

- the novel tells life, the short story tells a fragment of a life;
- the short story deals with a single thing, the novel with many things;
- the short story is a sample, the novel is the whole hog;
- the novel is a whole text; the short story is not.

Like Ferguson, she also considers that shortness cannot be an intrinsic property of anything, but can only be seen as relative to something else.

As already seen, short story definition has proved surprisingly resistant to critical effort and it appears that a definition satisfactory to all, formalists, structuralists, poststructuralists, feminists, and all the various critical splinter groups, is impossible. Short stories have been defined in terms of unity (Poe, Brander Matthews), techniques of plot compression (Norman Friedman), change or revelation of character (Theodore Stroud), subject (Frank O'Connor), tone (Nadine Gordimer), lyricism (Alberto Moravia), and so on.

Another difficulty critics have had to grapple with concerns the dynamic and variable ways in which size and genre interact. A complete account of dimension and genre would have to consider all the hybrids, the possible combinations of "short" and "long". Thus, Mary Rohrberger says:

What we need to do as theorists of the short story is to avoid throwing out theories because we see exceptions or because boundaries between

categories are fuzzy. A table is a flat surface with legs. When we have a table that comes out of a wall and is held in position by wall and brace, like an ironing board, do we call it something other than "table"? Do we abandon the concept "tree" because there are dwarf willows, giant cactuses, and strangler figs? Such conflicts are encountered whenever one is confronted with the task of assigning phenomena to categories. (Rohrberger, 1989: 128)

For Brander Matthews, the fundamental distinction between short story and novel lies beyond the length factor:

The Short-story is nothing if there is no story to tell; one might almost say that a Short-story is nothing if it has no plot, except that "plot" may suggest a complication and an elaboration which are not really needful. But a plan the Short-story must have, while it would be easy to cite Novels of eminence which are wholly amorphous – for example, Tristram Shandy. The more carefully we study the history of fiction the more clearly we perceive that the Novel and the Short-story are essentially different – that the difference between them is not one of mere length only, but fundamental. The Short-story seeks one set of effects in its own way, and the Novel seeks a wholly distinct set of effects in a wholly distinct way. We are also led to the conclusion that the Short-story – in spite of the fact that in our language it has no name of its own – is one of the few sharply defined literary forms. It is a genre, a species, as a naturalist might call it, as individual as the Lyric itself and as various. It is as distinct an entity as the Epic, as Tragedy, as Comedy. (...) The Short-story is in reality a genre, a separate kind, a genus by itself. (Matthews, 1964: 14)

Although Matthews may have gone too far with some of his formulas and therefore helped to create an entire industry of "how-to" books on the short story, he is right to insist that the difference between the novel and the short story or even the mere anecdote and the short story has something to do with what he calls "neatness of construction" and "polish of execution." Matthews' emphasis, as it was for Poe, is on the "plot" understood as pattern or unified plan, not a mere anecdotal series of events. As opposed to the novel, Matthews suggests that the short story focuses only on those details that are "bound" to the pre-established plan, not on details that provide either a cross section of life or fidelity to the external world.

As early as 1909, J. Berg Esenwein (in Current-Garcia, 1961), considers that definitions are dangerous things. The more vital a thing is, the more difficult to fence it in, to fix its limitations by statute. Accordingly, Esenwein finds it easier to start by saying what a short story is not: a condensed novel (due to its singleness of effect, more minute scope, and simplicity of structure), an episode, a scenario or synopsis, a biography, a tale. For Esenwein, a short story is marked by seven characteristics:

- a single, predominating incident
- a single preeminent character

- imagination
- plot
- compression
- organisation
- unity of impression.

He does, eventually, venture his own definition:

A short story is a brief, imaginative narrative, unfolding a single predominating incident and a single chief character; it contains a plot, the details of which are so compressed, and the whole treatment so organized, as to produce a single impression. (Esenwein, 1909: 51)

The definition certainly brings Poe to mind, all the more so as Esenwein also partakes of an organic view of the story:

Do not forget that the whole is greater than the sum of all its parts. The completed result must possess a spirit all its own, it must be almost a living personality. And who will analyze that for us and lay bare its vital secret? At every stage of our inquiry we must feel how impossible it is to saw up a story and find anything more than lumber, or to nail and glue its parts together and have aught other than a grinning wooden clown. The story, the yarn is the big thing. Unless the writer have a story to tell the telling of it is foolish contradiction. (Esenwein, 1909: 53)

In his turn, H.S. Canby (1915) points to the structural weakness of the “well-made”, formulaic type of story:

I do not deny that this supposedly successful short story is easy to read. It is fatally easy. And here precisely is the trouble. To borrow a term from dramatic criticism, it is “well made”, and that is what makes it so thin, so bloodless, and so unprofitable to remember, in spite of its easy narrative and its “punch”. Its success as literature is limited by the very rigidity of its carefully perfected form. Like other patent medicines, it is constructed by formula (the breakneck beginning which Kipling made obligatory; once started, the narrative must move, move, move furiously, each action and every speech pointing directly toward the unknown climax. A pause is a confession of weakness. Then the climax, which must neatly, quickly, and definitely end the action for all time, either by a solution you have been urged to hope for in every preceding paragraph, or in a way which is logically correct but never, never suspected. O’Henry is responsible for the vogue of the latter of these two alternatives, and the strain of living up to his inventiveness has been frightful. Finally comes a last suspiration. Sometimes it is a beautiful descriptive sentence charged with sentiment, sometimes a smart epigram, according to the style of story, or the “line” expected of the author. (in Current-Garcia, 1961: 60)

Canby seems, indeed, to be implicitly announcing the decline of the “plotty” type of story seen as no longer adequate for the presentation of modern life.

This formula is probably the best way of making the short story a thoroughly efficient tool for the presentation of modern life. And there lies, I believe, the whole trouble. The short story, its course plotted and its form prescribed, has become too efficient. And efficiency is not the most, it is perhaps the least, important among the undoubted elements of good literature. In order to make the short story efficient, the dialogue, the setting, the plot, the character development, have been squeezed and whittled and moulded until the means of telling the story fits the ends of the story-telling as neatly as hook fits eye. We are in the grip of the “formula”, of the idea that there is only one way to construct a short story - a swift succession of climaxes rising precipitously to a giddy eminence. (Canby, 1915: 68)

In what follows, we shall try to show why we think the difference between story and novel is one of kind, not of degree. The novel is, of course, the form with which the short story is most often compared – the short story is in fact defined “against” the novel, which is considered to be the major form and the norm in fiction. The short story is often seen as the “poor cousin” of the novel and, because it is defined in terms of the novel, it is bound to fail in many respects. The short story is often not so much condemned as left between brackets because it is considered to lack the “breadth”, scope, universality and representative qualities of the novel. Because it is short, the material can be but fragmentary, subjective, partial; if the material is subjective, fragmentary, partial, the form must be short - it is a circular argument.

To our mind, the main difference between novel and short story is rather the result of a fundamental difference in the “set” of the two forms. Within the novel, images function metonymically, i.e., each image as it appears resumes something of what has preceded it in the text, while in the short story foregrounded details or “images” tend to resist such interpenetration and integration. There is no space in the short story for cross-reference or repetition, which is why its images disturb us in a distinctly non-novelistic way.

To return to the difference in the “set” or orientation of the forms of the novel and short story, let us mention that formalist, structuralist and poststructuralist critics argue that any given “element” – word, detail, image – turns into something else, becomes a “token of something else”, in Borges’s phrase, as it enters into the articulation and organisation of a literary work as a whole. Poststructuralist critics have argued too that any literary work may be characterised as a structure of representation and selection founded on the primary impulse to dream/desire: thus, the greater the orientation towards desire, the further language is removed from its functional and restricted meaning. We are working toward the suggestion that the short story is a more “literary” form than the novel in this sense – in its orientation

toward the power words hold, or release and create, over and above their mimetic or explicatory function.

In this connection, let us return to that “limited” quality of the short story which is often adversely compared with the all-inclusive universal power of the novel. The term “limited” means not only something restricted but also something around which “bounds” have been drawn. In this second sense, the word “limited” may suggest simply the concept of framing. Can we then suggest that the tight structure and strict requirements of the short story act in the widest sense as a frame, or limit, which allows a narrative to remain in a more fragmented but also in a more suggestive state than is possible in the novel? The frame acts as an aesthetic device, permitting ellipses to remain in a story, which still retains a necessary air of completeness and order because of the very existence of the frame. We thus accept a degree of mystery, elision, uncertainty in the short story as we would not in the novel.

This formal property of the short story may facilitate two things. First, it can allow images from the unconscious mind to fuel a short story and to present themselves in the text in a relatively untranslated state. Such images retain an air of mystery and impenetrability, an air of dream. They exist as much as figures of unconscious desire as consciously representational images. In this respect we should bear in mind the function of the image in relation to the unconscious. The image, as a mental/visual manifestation, acts as a metaphor for, or a substitute for a repressed signifier, that is, the subject cannot admit a given meaning to consciousness, cannot admit it to the conscious world of the symbolic. The meaning can be expressed, however, through the non-verbal image-token in the world of the imaginary.

The second point about elision in the short story relates to the movement of desire on the part on the reader. The imagination of the reader is stirred in a particular way by the elliptical structure of many short stories. Elisions and gaps within a text offer a special space for the workings of the reader’s imagination, offer space for the work of that image-making faculty: the reader’s desire is thus allowed, or rather invited, to enter the text.

As such, we may link desire with fantasy which we cannot simply define in terms of a negative or antithetical relationship to the real. Fantasy points to things which do/may exist beyond the known real – the fantastic is not just an inversion of reality, but works on the margins of reality, on the “dangerous edge” of the unknown. The dream, then, seems to be most closely associated with the short story and many a short story writer has written of the importance of dream in fuelling their work (Kipling, Hemingway, K. Mansfield, Frank O’Connor, Flannery O’Connor, E. Bowen). Again, it is not just that short stories may literally have their origins in dreams; it is more that they may be structured like dreams. It could well be that the structure of a short story or dream is significantly unlike the grammar of a novel, which depends on order, incidence and sequence. In many short stories

events are not seen primarily as the fruits of time or as the culmination of long processes. They tend to have a random and arbitrary nature.

Going back for a moment to dreams, let us mention J.F. Lyotard's (1983) revision of the Freudian model of the dream which basically indicates that we should not attempt to look for the significance which lies "behind" the dream, but rather that it is the dream itself which is latent desire expressed. Hence its extraordinary power, its combination of the elements of familiarity and strangeness, the need to "read" the dream not symptomatically but literally.

This offers an interesting prototype for the way in which we might read short stories. The combination of strangeness and familiarity is typical of the short story as well. Does it derive from the fact that the short story is a channel for the expression of repressed or unconscious desire? We might say in this context that short stories often do not "tell" us things, despite the semantic proximity of the words story and tale - they "are" things. Consequently, let us observe that the short story is often committed to the discovery of new meaning through a strategy of revising and condensing old texts and known meanings. It is a form committed to the unknown, precisely to the obscure object of desire.

If the short story is the narrative form most closely implicated with desire, its content will always remain to an extent in a latent, potential state. Todorov (1977) considers that by speaking of desire, literature continues to speak itself. In this sense, the short story is a more self-referential, more "literary" form than the novel. This "literary" quality, the self-referential, free-standing linguistic quality connected with an orientation toward desire, may be felt as some kind of disjunction between reader and text: unlike the readers of a novel, the readers of a short story cannot easily lapse into the assumption that what they are reading about is "life", viz. themselves.

If the short story is structured like a dream and its constituent parts are related in ways obscure to reader and writer, then the short story refuses to give us a world of law and order, a point of entry into and identification with the text. Sequence and relation appear disrupted as the short story does not always have to be, as it were, "stitched" together, as narrative, by the operations of the conscious mind. In the relation of its parts there is a dream quality which refers us back to the operations of the unconscious.

To conclude, let us reiterate our belief that the short story is a highly distinctive art form, different in kind, not in degree from the novel. The formal properties of the short story – disjunction, inconclusiveness, obliqueness – connect with the fact that the form may be used to express something suppressed/repressed in mainstream literature. The short story suggests that which cannot normally be said, hence its close connection, in form and content, with fantasy, which is another mode of expression for repressed desire or knowledge.

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