

HPEN5029/ HPEN6029 - WRITING PLACE : FOCUS ON THE SHORT STORY



The novel can still adhere to the classical concept of civilised society, of man as an animal who lives in a community, as in Jane Austen and Trollope it obviously does; but the short story remains by its very nature remote from the community – romantic, individualistic, and intransigent. (20)

One can put this crudely by saying that the form of the novel is given by the length; in the short story the length is given by the form... A great short story is not necessarily short at all, and the conception of the short story as a miniature art is inherently false. Basically the difference between the short story and the novel is not one of length. It is a difference between pure and applied storytelling, and in case someone has still failed to get the point, I am not trying to decry applied storytelling. Pure storytelling is more artistic, that is all, and in storytelling I am not sure how much art is preferable to nature. (26)

FRANK O'CONNOR, THE LONELY VOICE

AMERICAN SHORT STORIES

Edgar Allan Poe , 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'

Raymond Carver, 'The Father'

Joyce Carol Oates, 'The Situations' (i) 'Kittens'

Flannery O'Connor , 'A Good Man is Hard to Find'

CRITICAL COMMENTARIES ON THE SHORT STORY

Gabriela Tucan , 'What Is A Short Story Besides Short? Questioning Minds In Search Of Understanding Short Fiction' *Romanian Journal of English Studies*,

Florence Goyet, *The Classic Short Story, 1870-1925*, Open Edition Books

<https://books.openedition.org/obp/1470>

The baby lay in a basket beside the bed, dressed in a white bonnet and sleeper. The basket had been newly painted and tied with ice-blue ribbons and padded with blue quilts. The three little sisters and their mother, who had just gotten out of bed and was still not herself, and the grandmother all stood around the baby, watching it stare and sometimes raise its fist to its mouth. He did not smile or laugh, but now and then he blinked his eyes and flicked his tongue back and forth through his lips when one of the girls rubbed his chin.

The father was in the kitchen and could hear them playing with the baby.

‘Who do you love baby?’ Phyllis said and tickled his chin.

‘He loves us all,’ Phyllis said, ‘**but he really loves daddy because daddies are boys too.**’

The grandmother sat down on the edge of the bed and said, ‘Look at its little arms, so fat. And those little fingers! Just like its mother.,

‘Isn't he sweet?’ The mother said. ‘So healthy, my little baby.’

And bending over, she kissed the baby on its forehead and touched the cover over its arm. ‘We love him too.’

‘**But who does he look like, who does he look like?**’ Alice cried, and they all moved up closer round the basket to see who the baby looked like.

‘He has pretty eyes,’ Carol said.

‘All babies have pretty eyes,’ Phyllis said.

‘He has his grandfather’s lips,’ the grandmother said. ‘Look at those lips.’

‘I don't know...’ the mother said, ‘I wouldn't say.’

Raymond Carver ‘The Father’

'The nose! The nose!' Alice cried.

'What about his nose?' The mother asked.

'It looks like **somebody's nose**, the girl answered.

'No, I don't know,' the mother said 'I don't think so.'

'Those lips...' the grandmother murmured. 'Those little fingers...' she said, uncovering the baby's hand and spreading out its fingers.

'**Who does the baby look like?**

'**He doesn't look like anybody,**' Phyllis said. And they moved even closer.

'I know! I know!' Carol said. 'He looks like Daddy!' Then they looked closer at the baby.

'But who does Daddy look like?' Phyllis asked.

'**Who does Daddy look like?**' Alice repeated, and they all at once looked through the kitchen where the father was sitting at the table with his back to them

'**Why, nobody!**' Phyllis said and began to cry a little.

'Hush,' the grandmother said and looked away then back at the baby.

'**Daddy doesn't look like anybody!**' Alice said.

'**But he has to look like somebody,**' Phyllis said, wiping her eyes with one of the ribbons. **And all of them except the grandmother looked at the father, sitting at the table.**

He had turned around in his chair and his face was white and without expression.

CHARACTERISATION

in the **realist story**, every feature is pushed to its extreme to the point where it becomes almost abstract. Characters are prodigiously what they are, to the extent that they are bordering on the prodigy. In the **fantastic story**, the high-intensity descriptions will cross that border. Here, the subject will be not so much the characters in themselves, but rather the sensations and emotions they feel — and make us feel. (see Poe, 'Tell Tale Heart' and Oates, 'Kittens')

STRUCTURE

the classic short story is based on a **fundamental antithesis**, which creates a powerful tension. This may be achieved through a narrative reversal, or the contrast between two characters (for example, *Jekyll and Hyde*) or between two world visions (for example, European and American). ... The reason that **the ending of the short story is so powerful is because it brings into contact the two poles of the antithesis**, the two opposites that should never come into contact. The “surprise” ending simply unleashes the accumulated tension that has been building throughout the story. (See Carver, The Father)

ENTRY INTO THE NARRATIVE.

In order to help the reader immediately understand the scene, these stories often resort to “**preconstructed**” material, including stereotypes (not necessarily literary types, but understood social types). They are also **very focussed**, eliminating everything that is not their subject. (See all)

There is no form of society to which any character in it could possibly attach himself and regard as normal. In discussions of the modern novel we have come to talk of ... the novel without a hero. In fact, the short story has never had a hero. What it has instead is a submerged population group... That submerged population changes its character from writer to writer, from generation to generation. It may be Gogol's officials, Turgenev's serfs, Maupassant's prostitutes, Chekhov's doctors and teachers, Sherwood Anderson's provincials, always dreaming of escape.

...

Always in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about on the fringes of society, superimposed sometimes on symbolic figures whom they caricature and echo – Christ, Socrates, Moses... As a result there is in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not often find in the novel – and intense awareness of human loneliness. . Indeed, it might be truer to say that while we often read a familiar novel again from companionship, we approach the short story in a very different mood. It is more akin to the mood of Pascal's saying: *Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie* (Lonely Voice, 17-19)

BREAK

STRUCTURAL BREVITY

A short story is a photograph. South American writer Julio Cortázar insists that, like a successful photograph, the short story cuts off a fragment of reality to meet the physical limitations, but paradoxically, the selected segment acts “like an explosion which fully opens a much more ample reality, like a dynamic vision which spiritually transcends the space reached by the camera” (1994:246). This arresting metaphoric comparison is pertinent since it helps us realize that the discussion of the short story must begin with the notion of physical limits.

It is important to notice that both photographers and short story writers use that limitation aesthetically. By delimiting the image or the event, they must choose something meaningful that projects imagination toward a realm beyond the visual or literary anecdote in the photograph or in the story (Cortázar 1994:247). Short stories have the mysterious quality to ‘illuminate beyond themselves’. It appears then that his essential quality of structural brevity has not only served experimental writers but it relates to the idea of tension and intensity in the story. (Goyet)

Daddy was driving us home. Three of us in the backseat and Lula, who was his favorite, in the passenger's seat.

Lula cried, Oh Daddy!—look.

At the side of the road, in broken grasses, was something small and furry-white, which appeared to be alive.

Oh Daddy, please.

Daddy laughed. Daddy braked the car to a stop. Lula jumped out of the car. We ran back with her, to discover in the broken grasses three small kittens—white, with black and russet markings. We picked up the kittens! They were so tiny, fitting in the palms of our hands, weighing only a few ounces! Each was mewling, its eyes scarcely open. Oh, oh!—we'd never seen anything so wonderful in our lives! We ran back to the car where Daddy was waiting, to beg Daddy to take them home with us.

At first, Daddy said no. Daddy said the kittens would make messes in the car.

Lula said, Oh Daddy, please. We all promised to clean up any messes the kittens made.

So Daddy gave in. Daddy loved Lula best, but we were happy to be Daddy's children, too.

In the backseat, we had two of the little kittens. In the front, Lula was holding the whitest kitten. We were so excited! So happy with the kittens! Lula said she would call the whitest kitten Snowflake, and we said we would call our little kittens Pumpkin and Cinder because Pumpkin had orange splotches in his white fur, and Cinder had black splotches in his white fur.

For some minutes, Daddy drove in silence. We did all the chattering! You could hear tiny mews, if you listened hard.

Then, Daddy said, Do I smell a mess?

We cried, No, no!
I think I smell a mess.
No, Daddy!

Three messes. I smell them.
No, Daddy!

(And this was so: None of the kittens had made messes.)

But Daddy braked the car to a stop. At the bridge over the river where there is a steep ramp, outside our town and about two miles from our house, Daddy parked the car and said to Lula, Give me Snowflake, and Daddy squinted at us in the rear view mirror and said, Give me Pumpkin, and give me Cinder.

We began to cry. Lula cried loudest. But Daddy grabbed the little kitten from her and reached into the backseat red-faced and frowning to grab Pumpkin and Cinder from us. We were not strong enough, and we were not brave enough to keep Daddy from taking the kittens from us, in Daddy's big hand. The kittens were mewling loudly by this time and quivering in terror.

Daddy left the car and with big Daddy-strides climbed the ramp to the bridge and threw the kittens over the railing. **Three tiny things rising at first against the misty sky, then quickly falling, and gone.**

When Daddy returned to the car, Lula cried, Daddy, why?

Daddy said, Because I am Daddy, who decides how things end.

Joyce Carol Oates, 'Kittens' (The Situations)

READING SHORT FICTION AND THE WORKINGS OF COUNTERFACTUAL THINKING

The short story's hypothetical plots can generate a higher number of possible courses of narrative developments than in longer fiction. This means that the reader will constantly ask questions about the multitude of possibilities that arise from deletions and substitutions. In other words, the reader is required to stay alert for potential narrative developments, regarding, for instance, what could be happening in the present of the story, what might have happened in the past, what may yet happen (based on present evaluations), or what may never actually happen.

On this view, readers are asked to draw inferences about existents or actions that have only been implicitly included in the text, and in the end, they should draw mental representations of these implicit items. Apart from what 'happens' in the world of the text, readers may need to make sense of other dynamic alternative worlds that are dreamed of, imagined, wished for, or secretly planned by characters. Short 'storyness' thus resides in the reader's ability to recognize this large alternative system of the text and later bring it to life. (Goyet)

DISCUSSION

CONSIDER THE POSSIBLE BEGINNINGS OF THE
SHORT STORY THAT FOLLOWS

Myop gazed around the spot with interest. Very near where she'd stepped into the head was a wild pink rose. As she picked it to add to her bundle she noticed a raised mound, a ring, around the rose's root. It was the rotted remains of a noose, a bit of shredding plowline, now blending benignly into the soil. Around an overhanging limb of a great spreading oak clung another piece. Frayed, rotted, bleached, and frazzled—barely there—but spinning restlessly in the breeze. Myop laid down her flowers.

And the summer was over.

Alice Walker, 'The Flowers'