

Chapter Title: The Tools of Brevity

Book Title: The Classic Short Story, 1870-1925

Book Subtitle: Theory of a Genre

Book Author(s): Florence Goyet

Published by: Open Book Publishers

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vjtn.8>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



JSTOR

Open Book Publishers is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Classic Short Story, 1870-1925*

4. The Tools of Brevity

The short story is almost always praised for its “economy of means”. In the classic short story, this restraint is not to be found in the narrative elements that, to the contrary, we have seen to be built on extremes. Nevertheless the short story clearly proceeds towards its goal with a particular speed and effectiveness: within only a few pages, the reader is introduced to a full universe and knows what is at stake in the narrative. The aim of this chapter is to understand how the classic short story achieves this acceleration of comprehension in the reader — its means being drastically different from those of the novel or what I propose to call the “modern” short story. The antithetical structure, as we saw in the previous chapter, is part of the expedition of the readers’ understanding. However, there are two other particularly important techniques that we will examine in detail in this chapter: the use of preconstructed material, and the device of focussing exclusively on the subject.

If we are quick to grasp what is at stake in a classic short story, it is because, first and foremost, we are already familiar with the text’s characters, situations and values. The classic short story uses what we could call “preconstructed” material: something “ready-to-understand” in the same sense as “ready-made”. The reader is introduced to a universe whose elements he or she recognises because she has come across or thought of them previously. These elements can be — and are certainly in the great stories — organised in a new, piquant way. But the fact that they

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0039.4

are already in some way familiar means that the reader can process them more quickly.

The techniques used in this process are themselves diverse. The short story can use an historical character as the protagonist — someone famous who needs no introduction to the reader; it can re-use a character that is familiar to the reader from another story in the same collection; it can create an “empty” character to be given a personality by the reader; or it can revert to the use of types. The only thing these techniques have in common is the particular role they play in “accelerating” our involvement in the text. This chapter will also review what we could call the “tight focus” on the subject: the classic short story eliminates from consideration everything that is exterior to the precise situation on which it is centred. It concentrates on a partial aspect of the general tableau selected for its subject. However, excluding anything that is not dependent on the precise narrative goal is not a simple “suspension” of the context; it gives a partial — and eventually false — representation of a particular detail.

Preconstructed material

As usual, we shall begin with the simplest case, and look at examples in which the story relies on the use of famous or historical characters. Apart from texts whose sole interest rests in presenting some aspect of a famous person’s life,¹ there are many short stories where the reader applies his or her previous knowledge of the hero or of the theme of the story: Nikolai Leskov’s *Ledi Makbet mtsesnskogo uezda* (*Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*); Leonid Andreev’s *Lazarus* and *Judas Iscariot*; Mori Ōgai’s *Hanako*, in which the main character is Auguste Rodin; Gustave Flaubert’s *Saint Julien l’Hospitalier*; and Akutagawa’s *Karenoshō* (*Withered Fields*) which we have already discussed in Chapter Two.

Clearly *Withered Fields* would lose its essential strength if the heroes were not the well-known disciples of Bashō, revered in Japan since the seventeenth century. If that were not so, the writer would first have to explain at length the disciples’ virtues as well as their master’s greatness and charisma. The fame of his characters allows Akutagawa to proceed to

1 Maupassant’s *Auprès d’un mort* (*Beside a Dead Man*), for example, is only interested in describing Schopenhauer’s wake. Guy de Maupassant, *The Complete Short Stories of Guy de Maupassant*, trans. by Artine Artinian (Garden City, NY: Hanover House, 1955), pp. 922-25.

the development of the scene. This does not mean, however, that we need to be familiar with each character's individuality in order to appreciate the text: all we need is to grasp the terms of the problem that will be set before us. Western readers who are not familiar with Bashō only have to read the translator's short note indicating their status as good men *par excellence* to be able to enjoy the text. Merely the evocation of these well-known disciples, or of Lady Macbeth, for example, already provides the reader with a complete idea of what might happen in this story, and the writer can begin *in medias res*.

In fact, one might say that *all* characters in the classic short story could be described as in some way famous, or at least (well)-known. My point is not that the short story only provides the reader with traditional literary types or stock characters; on the contrary, everyone insists, and with good reason, on the number and variety of the short story's characters. Henry James and Anton Chekhov have both declared that if their short stories were put end to end they would present a complete picture of the society of their time.² This is not inaccurate: an immense panorama of social roles, often overlooked by literature in the past, can be found in the work of short story writers where outlaws, pariahs and marginal people are consecrated by literature.

My point is that all of these social (or psychological) roles are already known to the reader in one way or the other. It could be the first time he or she has read about them in a literary text, but he has already in some way "heard of them". He may not be able to describe their life with the zest of the storyteller, but at least he can place them on society's chessboard; he can recognise their social role. In short, these are "objective types", types found in everyday life, even if they are not literary types. When Ambrose Bierce describes the frontiersmen, when Herman Melville uses seamen in his stories, when Rudyard Kipling mentions the natives of a small town in India, they instantly evoke in the reader's mind clear notions of what an Indian, or a struggling seaman, or a frontiersman is, even if the reader has never met someone like this in the flesh. The story will build on these preconceived notions, without needing to describe the character in detail first.

2 James wrote to Robert Louis Stevenson: "I want to leave a multitude of pictures of my time, projecting my small circular frame upon as many different spots as possible". Henry James, *Letters: 1883-1895*, ed. by Leon Edel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), III, p. 240.

It is the same with characters not quite so exotic: the ridiculous provincial who haunts the stories of Guy de Maupassant or Chekhov was only too well known to readers of the time, who delighted in his endless misadventures, repeated in after-dinner jokes as well as in stories in the newspapers. This character was also very present in the mind of the readers of intellectual journals, who were concerned with the social misery of the provinces. When the Naturalists describe prostitutes or outlaws, when Giovanni Verga presents his Florentine or Milanese readers with Sicilian fishermen and muleteers, or peasants, they are illustrating a problem that was at the centre of attention in Europe at that time.

In short, this genre — perhaps more than any other form — relies on the readers' own knowledge of the world and its various actors to proceed immediately to the story. The short story will fill one of the sections of the chessboard, giving flesh and blood to the idea the reader already has (which may well have been an abstract and lifeless representation). But at the same time — and this is essential — the short story relies on “ready made” characters. The interest in reverting to such types is obvious: the characters emerge in the reader's mind fully equipped, like Athena from Jove's head, and the reader can follow them in their adventures without losing time in discovering each of their features in detail.

Not only does the short story resort to what is already known, but it also may even repeat the process of “prefabrication”. Other characters will be deduced from a character within the text itself. We have already seen quite a few examples of this in Chapter One. Irving Saposnik comments in reference to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* that Hyde is none other than a “deformed” Jekyll, a Jekyll in reverse; created in our imagination by a simple reversal of the signs for each of Jekyll's traits.³ Similarly, in O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi*, Jim is a sort of “male Della”, the masculine version of the virtue Della represents; and in Verga's *Gramigna's Mistress*, the rebel Gramigna is the diametric opposite of the heroic “Tallow Candle”. These are not, admittedly, the most subtle of short stories, but we have seen that even the more nuanced stories also use the technique: the fiancée of the devoted Corvick in James's *The Figure in the Carpet* is “obtained” simply by splitting Corvick himself in two, and Corvick, by a reduplication of the narrator: he is another admirer of Vereker, only more devoted.

3 Irving Saposnik, *Robert Louis Stevenson* (New York: Twayne, 1974), p. 101.

Character types

Here we are touching on a central point: the nature of the enjoyment that is particular to this genre. If the short story is so willing to reproduce its characters from each other or to take them completely formed from society, it is because its interest lies elsewhere. It is hardly feasible to abide by the assertion, though commonly held, that the short story “does not have the time” to build the characters and the universe it presents to us.⁴ Brevity has never prevented lyric poetry from elaborating subtle psychological elements, for example. What is more, the constraint of length is not always rigorous; and if magazines have sometimes imposed a precise word count on their authors, it is *because* the short story already existed as a genre, and not the contrary.⁵

The key to this might be that the classic short story favours the effects of structure over the examination and development of characters, over the building of a complex universe. Critics like Boris Eikhenbaum, Tzvetan Todorov or Romano Luperini were not mistaken when they rejected any idea of “psychological depth” in the characters of short stories;⁶ Todorov argues that their value is “functional” and Luperini that they are two-dimensional.⁷

-
- 4 Given as self-evident, the phrase “*la nouvelle n’a pas le temps*” (“the short story does not have the time”) is a cliché in French criticism, found everywhere in textbooks. See for example, Jean-Pierre Blin, “Enseigner la nouvelle: perspectives et limites d’une didactique”, in *La Nouvelle et d’aujourd’hui*, ed. by Johnnie Gratton and Jean-Philippe Imbert (Paris: Éditions L’Harmattan, 1998), pp. 187-98 (p. 193). It is also used as a statement of definitive truth in educational materials from the Ministère de l’Éducation Nationale: “Contrary to the novel, the short story does not have the time to elaborate the thoughts and feelings of the characters”, *Lire une nouvelle réaliste de Maupassant*, available at <http://www.academie-en-ligne.fr/Ressources/4/FR41/AL4FR41TEWB0112-Sequence-01.pdf>, p. 14 (accessed 22/10/13, translation ours). Even Sean O’Faolain states that in the short story “there is no time for explanation” but for him this means that there must be an allusive power in the short story (as we have seen above). He later remarks that style is in fact often *slower* in the short story: “In a short story one concentrates. Naturally the style is retarded”. Later, referring to Stephen Crane’s *The Monster*, he says “Compare this slow meticulous style with that of a novelist”. Sean O’Faolain, *The Short Story* (Cork: Mercier, 1948), pp. 197, 254 and 255.
 - 5 In Japan, the constraints of length have always been very loose, and for a long period authors had no definition of the form of the short story (the term itself, *taupen shōsetsu*, did not exist before the end of the nineteenth century); many of the short stories of Ōgai, Kunikida Doppo or Akutagawa nevertheless present their characters in exactly the same way, resorting to what the reader already knows.
 - 6 See Boris Eikhenbaum, “How Gogol’s ‘Overcoat’ is Made”, in *Gogol’s ‘Overcoat’: An Anthology of Critical Essays*, ed. by Elizabeth Trahan (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1982), pp. 21-36. The original Russian is in *Literatura: teoriya, kritika, polemika* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1927), pp. 149-65.
 - 7 Tzvetan Todorov, *Grammaire du Décaméron* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969); and Romano

The reverse opinion is so common, however, that it must be examined. For a great number of Anglophones and almost all French critics, the short story accelerates the process of perception and entry into the narrative world, but this is attributed to the genre's "allusive power", which would suggest everything it does not say. In their opinion, the genre's value belongs to its characters, which offer great depth and psychological complexity. The length of time spent in elaboration would be replaced by the intensity of the reader's work and by the genre's remarkable ability to create for us an entire character out of a few elements provided by the text. There would be a magic belonging to the text of short stories that could stimulate *something new* in the mind of the reader, and not, as I have suggested something already known or foreseen.

Sean O'Faolain is a typical proponent of this idea, and his remarks on the allusive art of Chekhov are worth pausing to review. O'Faolain states that in *Lady with Lapdog*, the reader is invited "to plumb her [Gurov's wife's] character, to let [the reader's] imagination expand her inward nature from a few outward signs".⁸ He also praises the short story's format as being more capable of suggestion than the novel. The examples he gives, however, seem to me to be counter to his thesis. He illustrates his argument with two descriptions of the spouses of the heroes from *Lady with Lapdog*. First, Gurov's wife:

She was a tall, erect woman with dark eyebrows, staid and dignified, and, as she said of herself intellectual. She read a great deal, used phonetic spelling, called her husband not Dmitri but Dimitri, and he secretly considered her unintelligent, narrow, inelegant, and did not like to be at home.⁹

Then the husband of Anna Sergeevna:

He bent his head at every step and seemed to be continually bowing. This was the husband whom, in a rush of bitter feeling, she once called a flunkey. And there really was in his long figure, his side-whiskers, and the small bald patch on his head, something of the flunkey's obsequiousness; his smile was

Luperini, *Verga: l'ideologia, le strutture narrative, il "caso" critico* (Lecce: Millela, 1982). See also Giuseppe Lo Castro, *Giovanni Verga: una lettura critica*, *Saggi brevi di letteratura antica e moderna*, 5 (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2001), about types in Verga (p. 23 and p. 63).

⁸ O'Faolain (1948), p. 190.

⁹ Here as quoted by O'Faolain, p. 189. The full text of *Lady with Lapdog* can be found in Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, *Lady with Lapdog and Other Stories*, trans. by David Magarshack (London: Penguin, 1964), pp. 264-81 (hereafter Magarshack). For the Russian translation, see Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem*, 30 vols (Moscow: Nauka, 1974-1983), X, pp. 128-43 (hereafter Nauka).

sugary and in his buttonhole there was some badge of distinction like the number on a waiter.¹⁰

It seems strange that in reading this we could have the impression of “plumbing her character, letting [our] imagination expand her inward nature from a few outward signs”.¹¹ On one hand, this is true: we do indeed see something appear. We have a vivid picture before our eyes. The power of the description, its effective reliance on hypotyposis, makes the portrait successful. But what we see forming is not a personality in the sense that the novel has taught us to apply this term, but a *type*, and one that is hardly subtle at that.

There is no need to have an in-depth knowledge of Russia at the end of the nineteenth century in order to see that, in the case of Gurov’s wife, we are dealing with a Bluestocking. Even for the reader who has not been forewarned, these few “external signs” are enough to figure out the *role* — in the theatrical sense — of the woman who forces her talent, who clumsily imitates the exalted manners of her time. Certainly, for the Russian reader of the period, this description will recall a particular type of pedant, the intellectual woman of the 1860s, so often mocked in literature. The description is indeed effective. However, I do not think that we can go so far as to say that the resulting character is very complex.¹²

The second example is more instructive, because it reveals the essential fact of the variety of these “roles”, which, no doubt, prevented the critics from recognising the presence of types in short stories.¹³ Anna’s husband is

10 O’Faolain (1948), p. 190.

11 Ibid.

12 Diana Festa McCormick notes that we know very little about the story’s hero Georges d’Estouteville in Honoré de Balzac’s *Maitre Cornélius*: “What is extraordinary, however, is that each character, despite the limited perspective in which he is presented, appears lively and convincing; it is because Balzac gives *what is essential about each being*, the most striking traits, to allow us readers to *fill in the gaps* left by his pen. Each character is a sketch, an outline which should suggest the complete person”. She continues: “And he is defined by his love or the passion which controls him. Georges d’Estouteville is *defined* by his love for Marie de Vallier”. McCormick sees clearly that the characters do not emerge from the narrow framework of their definition; yet she does not follow her reasoning to its conclusion: we reconstruct, true, but a two dimensional character, enclosed within a strict definition. See Diana Festa McCormick, *Les Nouvelles de Balzac* (Paris: Nizet, 1973), pp. 134-35 (translation ours; emphases mine).

13 That is certainly the case for French criticism. For the Anglophone critics, however, my feeling is that they are interested essentially in Chekhov’s “epiphanic” stories — a few stories at the end of his career that are very near to Hawthorne’s or the twentieth century (“modern”) short stories. *Lady with Lapdog* is not one of these late stories, but, as we mentioned earlier, it is one of his most complex short stories, which goes beyond this “ready-made” material. In this case, this schematic material is in fact “filled up” by the

also a type, because all the traits converge towards the same concept: that of the ridiculous husband. Here he is *explicitly* confined to his definition: Anna treats him like a “flunkey” and the narrator notes that in truth he fits that definition well.¹⁴ What follows further illustrates the concept: the detailed traits are equally the characteristics of the flunkey. But — and this is the most important point — he does not correspond to a type that is particularly easy to define. He is a servile professor, an important provincial who is, in the larger scheme of things, a non-entity. This type has not been codified in the way the bluestocking of the 1860s has.

But in fact he has the same status in the text, as we see from the assimilation of the “distinguished member of the university” into “just another waiter”. This brief description “locks” the character into his role; it is the keystone that eternally supports the building. This light is a little too bright, and the character is without shadow or shade. The fact that the “professor who resembles a flunkey” is not a pre-existing literary type changes nothing: he can immediately be imagined by the reader, because he corresponds in every detail to a definition whose elements are pre-established. The literature of the nineteenth century is full of ridiculous, pompous or pitiful provincial notables, and we recognise one of them immediately when we see him, even if he is of a slightly different species.

Perhaps this process is best delineated by Maupassant. In *Le Rosier de Mme Husson (An Enthusiast)*,¹⁵ the narrator lingers over this rapidity of perception and illuminates for us this process of evoking a character in its entirety, which has been so often called the “work of short story readers”.¹⁶

reader, as a result of the richness of the story as a whole. It should not prevent us from seeing that Chekhov uses the same devices as other story-tellers of his time, albeit in a very personal way.

- 14 “And there really was [...] something of the flunkey’s obsequiousness”. O’Faolain (1948), p. 180; Nauka, X, p. 139.
- 15 Guy de Maupassant, *The Complete Short Stories of Guy de Maupassant*, trans. by Artine Artinian (Garden City, NY: Hanover House, 1955), pp. 866-76 (hereafter Artinian). The original French text can be found in Guy de Maupassant, *Contes et nouvelles*, ed. by Louis Forestier, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, collection La Pléiade, 1974), II, 950-66 (hereafter Pléiade).
- 16 Critics speak constantly of the “effort” of a reader who participates much more intensely in the constitution of the text of a short story than in a novel. Helmut Bonheim, however, carried out a survey of a series of readers, and in the short story he found that they rarely added new elements but simply followed the “program” established by the text. See Helmut Bonheim, *The Narrative Modes: Techniques of the Short Story* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982). On the short stories of Flaubert and Joyce, see André Topia, “Joyce et Flaubert: les affinités sélectives”, in *James Joyce: Scribble 2: Joyce et Flaubert* (Paris, Minard, 1990), pp. 33-63. According to Topia, too, the reader sees the figures vaguely, but invents

The narrator arrives at the home of an old school friend, a provincial doctor, whom he has not seen for twelve years. He introduces him to the reader as he finds him on the doorstep of his house:

I never should have known him. One would say he was forty-five at least, and, in a second [the] whole [of] provincial life appeared before me, dulling, stupefying and aging him. In a single bound of thought, more rapid than the gesture of extending my hand to him, I knew his whole existence, his manner of life, his bent of mind and his theories of living. I suspected the long repasts which had rounded his body, the little naps after dinner in the torpor of a heavy digestion sprinkled with brandy, and the vague contemplation of the sick, with thoughts of roast fowl waiting before the fire. His conversation on cooking, cider, brandy and wine, upon certain dishes and well-made sauces [were revealed to me just by looking at] the red puffiness of his cheeks, the heaviness of his lips and the dullness of his eyes.¹⁷

I have quoted this long description because, by its very length, it calls for several comments. First of all, it shows clearly that it is not a question of the short story having or not having the time to make a character complex. Long, detailed, and paroxystic, this description does not differ in length from one found in a novel. However, what is being developed at length here is nothing more than a series of the most worn-out *topoi* of provincial life. This is what makes it different from a description in a (great) novel: the short story's description develops the characteristics one by one until they converge towards a single concept. A "handful of signs" create for us a lively image, yes, but not the manifold facets of a human heart. The combined traits converge to create a stock character: a character whose concept is already in the reader's mind.

The rest of the short story does not challenge this concept of the "provincial" provided at the beginning: the long conversation between the two friends centres on the theme of food, and, as expected, the provincial will appear to be totally absorbed in material life, boasting of the set-up of his farm and the freshness of his produce. In other words, the description *actualises* the abstract idea, using it to the full, relying on the presuppositions it is based upon. When we make quick judgements, we are judging on the basis of well-established pre-existing values.¹⁸ What the short story evokes

nothing: his participation is not creative.

17 Artinian, p. 867 (emphasis mine).

18 See Pierre Boulez on improvisation: "what can [the improvising player] do? He can only turn to information he has been given on some earlier occasion, in fact to what he has already played". Pierre Boulez, *Orientations* (London: Faber, 1986), p. 461.

in the mind of the reader are not new ideas. If the reader can put together a total entity, that entity will bear the colours of his presuppositions on the subject; it is similar to the way that a musician, when improvising, makes use of known schemas.

Recurring characters and empty characters

There were two other means that were used in the nineteenth century and developed in the twentieth century to provide the reader with readily understandable material; they were used more in the “modern” as opposed to the classic short story that we have been reviewing here. The first of these is when the writer uses a character that he has introduced to the reader in another story in the same collection. Rudyard Kipling does this a couple of times in *Plain Tales From the Hills*. When he wants to introduce a character of whom the reader, for once, can have no “instinctive knowledge”, he proceeds in two steps. In a very descriptive story he introduces Mrs Hauksbee or the policeman Strickland — characters who are almost impossible for his British readers to imagine.¹⁹ Then, in a later story, he makes use of the already formed character whose bizarre traits are now familiar to the reader.²⁰ It is a technique whose function is akin to the reversion to type or to the use of historical characters: our previous knowledge hastens our comprehension.

This practice is one of the devices that gives cohesion to “cycles” or “sequences” of interrelated short stories.²¹ For Forrest Ingram and Susan

19 Mrs Hauksbee appears in *Three and — An Extra* and again in *The Rescue of Pluffles, Consequences* and *Kidnapped*. Strickland appears in *Miss Youghall Sais* and other stories in *Plain Tales From the Hills*.

20 The French philosopher Alain defines Balzac’s short stories, for example, as the “crossroads” at which the characters of the *Comédie humaine* meet. See Alain (Emile-Auguste Chartier), “Avec Balzac”, in *Les Arts et les Dieux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1937), p. 1018. For someone who has not read *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*, the Baron Nucingen in the short story *La Maison Nucingen* is perfectly schematic and frightening: he is the “ruthless banker”. Readers of the novel will have a slightly different impression: they will be repelled by his buying Esther, and at the same time moved by his love for her. The “substance” of the character therefore comes also from an exterior knowledge that precedes the short story.

21 On the difference between “cycle” and “sequence”, see for example James Nagel, *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre* (Baton Rouge, MA: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), p. 12. See also the notion of “epi-stories”, as a form intermediate between novel and stories, proposed by Andrea O’Reilly Herrera, “Sandra Benitez and the Nomadic Text”, in *Postmodern Approaches to the Short Story*, ed. by Farhat Iftekharrudin, Joseph Boyden, Joseph Longo and Mary Rohrberger (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, Praeger, 2003), pp. 51-62.

Garland Mann, it is precisely the presence of a recurring character that, in most cases, gives a cycle its unity; the reappearance of a hero makes it possible for the reader to remain on familiar territory.²² Sometimes, a cycle of short stories will make use of this familiarity in order to *rework* the types it presents, showing them in a slightly different light.²³ Although this subgenre is not our topic here, let us note that the story cycle has been one of the subjects attracting most critical attention in the last decade or so. Critics have convincingly argued that it was a genre in its own right, and may very well have been the most innovative form of that period in the United States.²⁴ This was the genre predominantly written and read by minorities, consequently modifying the relationship between author-reader and the subject addressed.²⁵ However, one should not assume that the cycles automatically play this role. In James Joyce's *Dubliners*, the inclusion in a gallery of converging portraits accentuates the satirical charge of each. In

22 See Susan Garland Mann, *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989); see also the classic Forrest L. Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in a Literary Genre* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971). Recent criticism, however, has emphasised the role in unifying the episodes of the setting. Nagel (2004) argues that a recurrent setting was historically the "most persistent" means of unifying cycles (p. 17), and Gerald Lynch shows this in Canadian story cycles. Gerald Lynch, "The One and the Many: Canadian Short Story Cycles", in *The Tales We Tell: Perspectives on the Short Story*, ed. by Rick Feddersen, Susan Lohafer, Barbara Lounsbury and Mary Rohrberger (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, Praeger, 1998), pp. 35-46.

23 This would be particularly true when the cycle relies on a plurality of narrators rather than one particular recurring narrator. A good example, outside our time-span, would be Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron*: between the stories themselves, the narrators/listeners develop full-length discussions about what they just heard. This allows for a new approach to the stories material, and for reappraisal of the characters. Nagel (2004) describes the genre as having "contrasting point of views", as in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (pp. 128-52 and 188-222). See also Herrera (2003) on the "prism" offered by the "epi-stories". On the sequence as allowing "each apocalypse" to "be served in its own cup; the collision by no means shatter[ing] the vessel of the short story, even if some of the contents spill over", see Robert M. Luscher, "The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book", in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, ed. by Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), pp. 148-167 (p. 167).

24 Nagel (2004) stresses the importance of the form, both in quantity and in quality: "By the turn of the century, nearly a hundred volumes of story cycles had appeared in the United States, and the genre was not yet in its most important phase [...] Scores of narrative cycles appeared in each decade of the new century, some of them containing individual works that are among the best ever published in English" (pp. 4-5).

25 "That for the last century many of the most important works of this kind were written by authors from differing ethnic backgrounds suggests that [...] the story sequence offers not only a rich literary legacy but a vital technique for the exploration and depiction of the complex interactions of gender, ethnicity, and individual identity". *Ibid.*, p. 10 (see also p. 17).

Go Down, Moses, John Carlos Rowe shows that the most profound feature of the cycle may well be William Faulkner's "ultimate inability to grant his African-American characters the independent voices he knows they must have in a truly 'New' South".²⁶

Finally there is the use of what we could call an "empty" character, a character that is hardly defined at all and can therefore be filled in by the reader. At the end of the nineteenth century, this is even more rare than the reuse of a character. In fact we only come across it in fantastic stories, which exploit the possibilities of the genre along very different lines from most classic short stories. Very near to the "I" used in lyric poetry, this "empty" character is the channel through which emotions are conveyed to the reader. Present in the narrative either as an actor or a witness, he receives no real characterisation, he is left "blank," and our attention is never directed to him as a person: he is our link to the text, a window on the narrative world.

In the fantastic stories of the nineteenth century, the "empty" character helps us to enter the world of the bizarre, because we are invited to share directly in his emotions — as we are in lyric poetry — and to share in his discovery of strange facts and behaviours. The narrator of Maupassant's *Sur l'eau* (*On The River*), discussed in Chapters One and Three, is a good example of this: his only defining trait is his extraordinary love of the river.²⁷ He is simply a means for conveying to us the strangeness of the adventure, allowing us to share in the excitement and dread of that night's phantasmagoria. He plays the same role of hastening our entry into the narrative; his blankness allows us to take his point of view.²⁸

Tight focus

The short story expels everything that is not its subject. At first glance, it seems normal that a text, particularly a short one, should not attempt to talk about everything. But the specific subject of the short story occupies all the narrative space, making itself the sole object, and losing all its connections

26 John Carlos Rowe, "The African-American Voice in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*", in *Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities*, ed. by J. Gerald Kennedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 76-97 (p. 78).

27 Artinian, pp. 169-72 (*Pléiade*, I, pp. 54-59).

28 When this character says "I", we are led to feel his experience could be ours. This, however, is not an automatic consequence of the use of the first person narrator, as we shall see in Part III (see especially Chapter Eleven).

with the world. It is only because waiting is shown as John Marcher's *only* activity in James's *The Beast in the Jungle*, that it can be presented in such a paroxystic fashion.²⁹ The classic short story usually removes its characters from their social ties and the relationships they have to the "real world", and sets them in the sole light of this particular adventure.

Let us think of the social life that a man like Marcher must have led in Victorian England: nothing is said about it, not a single reference is made to his social and cultural surroundings. We are told, incidentally, that both he and his most devoted friend, May Bartram, play their social role very well, but everything ensues as if that role does not exist. They go to the opera together a dozen times a month, but the text gives no hint of the gossip and social reprobation that a relationship such as theirs could not fail to produce in Victorian society. Once May Bartram makes a brief allusion to it ("‘I never said,’ May Bartram replied, ‘that it hadn’t made me talked about’"),³⁰ but it has absolutely no impact on them: they do not change anything in their life.

The descriptions of these conversational currents are not interesting in themselves, and there was certainly no need for James to recreate *Anna Karenina*. But we must recognise that all the terms of the problem are thus falsified: if James had described, or made us feel, the weight of Marcher's social life, if he had restored the real tissue of a man of society's life, he could no longer have presented the waiting for the Beast as prodigious, as the only element of his life. Even the choice of a woman's presence as companion in this wait fits this rarefied atmosphere. Playing on the widespread archetype of the woman who is totally devoted to the man she loves, who weds his values and his destiny, James can extend to her the paroxystic intensity of the waiting without having to justify it. Marcher's friendship with May Bartram is not meant to be a realistic relationship; hers is a duplication of his waiting. Only by blotting out the wider context can *The Beast in the Jungle* develop as a short story. If this tight focus is abandoned, and the exterior world is reintroduced, we are no longer dealing with the "pure bodies" the short story needs. Instead of immediately using simple concepts such as Marcher, the man-who-waits, and May Bartram, the companion-in-waiting, it would have been necessary to establish this waiting as a narrative object, rather than simply presenting it. Comparisons

29 Henry James, *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. by Leon Edel, 12 vols (New York: Rupert Hart Davis, 1960), XI, pp. 351-402 (hereafter Edel).

30 Edel, p. 374.

and suggestions of other influences and other preoccupations would have been necessary. The central proof, the reversal of destiny's "visitation" of Marcher, would not have had the same strength; in place of a perfect short story, there would have been the outline of a novel.

We must reject the short story's tame and modest definition of itself: "I am going to show what occurs when X meets Y, when something happens to X in certain circumstances". The idea of a brief and therefore fragmentary text often allows for an unquestioning acceptance of this definition, the short story as a presentation of fragments of existence in a realistic fashion. How could we not acknowledge the right of a short text not to "say everything"? And yet, to remove from the field of attention all that is not the limited subject (the "little action", or the "conchetto", in James's terms) does not, by any means, amount to a simple suspension of it.³¹ The result is a contrived presentation of this problem; it is now presented in a completely artificial light.³²

The "complete picture of society" that James or Chekhov suggested one could obtain by putting all their stories end to end is a fraud. Each text is entitled to resolve a unique problem, yes, but the point is that it does so by dealing with only one variable. It refuses to take into consideration all the others and inserts that one chosen variable into a very particular structure, in which everything makes sense. To repeat Marcher's words, enlightened by the discovery of the meaning of his whole history: "Everything fell together [...] the pieces fitted and fitted", but that is only because everything that could not fit in it has been expelled beforehand.³³ It would certainly be rather absurd to accuse James of not having created any real psychological complexity. And if I have chosen an example of his, it is because he cannot be suspected of lacking perfect mastery of such complexities. What should be noted, instead, is that complexity was not his intention in this case: it is never the intention in classic short stories.

31 Henry James, *The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. by F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), pp. 148 and 144 (hereafter *Notebooks*).

32 Valerie Shaw says something quite similar about James's stories: "The tightness of the frame actually helps to conceal the author's contrivance of patterns, because within the space marked out the author can appear to investigate the material for its own sake. Inside the frame, looseness can be simulated". Valerie Shaw, *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (London: Longman, 1983), p. 75. She does not, however, judge it to be a limitation of the genre: "Framed in a circle, 'The Real Thing' arranges its 'objects' in such a way as to offer us a complete, but not static picture" (p. 74).

33 *Ibid.*, p. 401.

Permanence of types

The short story not only starts with the ready-made, it never departs from it: it does not reshape its material in order to disavow the presupposed simplicity. The descriptions may be very strong and vivid, but they do not challenge either the terms in which the problem is set nor the prejudices of the reader. The characters remain types because they are enclosed in the very simple terms of their original definition. Here again it is important to be precise. The short story does not introduce variations but it may well turn the terms of the problem upside down and reverse the sign that precedes them: present as positive what we perceived to be negative, and vice versa.

Yet the short story almost never does more than present a negation in its purest and simplest form. Consider Maupassant's *Boule de suif* (*Ball of Fat*), a story which shows that it is a prostitute who is a true patriot, rather than the good citizens who scorn her.³⁴ The setting is the war of 1870 in which France was defeated and invaded by the Prussians. A group of bourgeois residents are fleeing Rouen by coach to protect themselves and their belongings, while proclaiming that they are resolute patriots ready to fight to the end. A prostitute, nicknamed "Ball of Fat" because she is "small, round and fat as lard", is also leaving town by the same coach.³⁵ Rejected and humiliated, she is nevertheless the only one to show herself capable of greatness of spirit. She refuses to yield to the Prussian officer who is detaining them all, and thinks, speaks and acts with a noble sense of pride. The bourgeois characters, on the other hand, behave basely and finally force her to make love to the Prussian so that they can continue their flight. These characters are vilified by Maupassant for their stupidity, cowardice and hypocrisy. The reader sees before him or her nonentities who are perfectly predictable, even if the extremities to which the text takes them are beyond what the reader would have imagined: pious nuns, for example, draw on biblical quotations to exhort Ball of Fat to give herself to the Prussian. Is it only because these are secondary characters? No, because Ball of Fat herself is treated in the same way: the text simply reverses a prejudice, it turns it upside down. The central antithetical tension contrasts the classic image of the prostitute-pariah with that of the prostitute-patriot.

34 Artinian, pp. 1-25 (Pléiade, I, pp. 83-121).

35 Ibid, p. 6.

This inversion is frequently found in short stories, and one of the obvious uses of tension is to “renew” a theme by taking the opposite view of a ready-made image. But it is clear that the battleground for discussion has not changed, that the terms of the problem are pre-determined: is the prostitute a person capable of greatness of soul? Bourgeois prejudice answers: “no”; Maupassant replies: “yes, and much more so than the townsfolk”. He thus does not change the usual way of thinking. He contradicts pre-existing presentations, but he is still tied to them. Similarly, at the end of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, we are not left with a character from a novel (neither completely good, nor entirely bad), but the coexistence stretched taut between two extremes that never mingle.

In conclusion, we can turn to the problem that Mary Doyle Springer raised without being able to solve: the difficulty of determining with any certainty the main character of James’s *The Aspern Papers*.³⁶ What troubles Springer is that the principal character seems to be the narrator, but, at the same time, James seems to deny him the stature of a hero; for example, in the preface to *The Golden Bowl* he says that this witness is “intelligent, but quite unindividualised”.³⁷ I agree that the essential character is the narrator, but I think that what we just saw makes it clear that what is important to James, here as well as in his other short stories, is not the individual.³⁸ What interests him is to see the ins and outs of a situation, of a “case”, a “problem” confronting a given character.³⁹ I think “given” should be understood in all its meanings: a precise character, but also a character whom he does not

36 Mary Doyle Springer, *Rhetoric of Literary Character: Some Women of Henry James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 167-248.

37 Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (New York: Scribner, 1962), p. 329.

38 Although he sees real psychological interest in James’s stories (pp. 86-87), Scofield (2006) says of *Julia Bride*: “Its subject is slight but intense (Julia Bride’s situation is complex but she is not a morally complex heroine)” (p. 82).

39 As the character in *Broken Wings* exclaims: “We’re simply the case” (here: “of having been had enough of”). Edel, XI, p. 232. The “little story” is associated in the *Notebooks* with the “subject”: “The great question of the *subject* surges in grey dimness about me. It is everything — it is everything” (*Notebooks*, p. 135). Recurring in the *Notebooks*, are the terms “little drama” (p. 168), “little action” (p. 148), “conchetto” (p. 144); and “problem” (“the simple effect that I see in the thing. This effect is that of the almost insoluble problem”, *ibid*, p. 168). See also Clare Hanson: “The subject [of the late nineteenth century tale, as opposed to the “plotless” short fiction] is the situation — extraordinary, bizarre, extreme in some way — which is usually referred back to the response of an ordinary, ‘typical’ human being”, Clare Hanson, *Short Stories and Short Fictions, 1880-1980* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), p. 6.

need to build for us to recognise, a character he need only to evoke through some of its characteristics.⁴⁰

As far as *The Aspern Papers* are concerned, these attributes are in fact reduced to their most simple expression; for us to understand and take pleasure in the text, it is enough for the hero to be intelligent, and have a true passion for the memory of the poet Jeffrey Aspern, in whose name he is ready to commit (and will in fact commit) anything vile. To say that the narrator is not individualised is not to say that he is secondary, but only that we are in a *short story*, and that therefore the interest does not lie in a person, a character, but in an event and a structure, from its initial preparation to its realisation.

Finally, it might very well be that Springer's question itself is influenced by the fact that she is dealing with short stories. Short stories do indeed almost always have a main character, and minor parts. Great novels generally don't. Who is the main character in *The Wings of the Dove* or *The Golden Bowl*? Who in Balzac's *La Rabouilleuse*? What distinguishes the character in a novel, as opposed to that in a short story, might well be a tendency to a *fusion* of opposites, no longer experienced as contrasts but as alloys; they are hybrids, resistant to stereotypes. The heroes of short stories, even the main characters, however, embody the coexistence of opposite extremes.

40 Springer (1976) is very aware of the supremacy of the situation; she remarks that James "certainly loved character, character in its fullest and subtlest development [...] But he loved one thing more: that the character should be true to the formal requirements of the story in which it appeared" (p. 138).

