



The Classic Short Story, 1870-1925

Theory of a Genre

Florence Goyet

THE CLASSIC SHORT STORY

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Introduction

This book aims to characterise what I consider to be the “classic” short story, which was written throughout the world by both major and minor short story writers in the period covering roughly 1870-1925. Although the short story has tended to be characterised as offering psychological complexity and nuanced characters, the classic short stories operated under extremely strict conventions. Despite the fact that this form of the short story was practiced so widely, its importance to the genre has yet to be sufficiently acknowledged in the extensive literature on the topic.

In the Anglophone world, two major works gave birth and shape to a revival of short story criticism in the late 1960s and 1970s.¹ Mary Rohrberger’s book on Nathaniel Hawthorne defined the short story as an epiphany, revealing to the reader that “there is more to the world than which can be discovered through the senses”.² Ten years later, Charles

1 On the history of short story criticism, see Susan Lohafer, “Introduction to Part I”, in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, ed. by Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), pp. 3-12. See also Lohafer’s (very brief, but particularly clear) outline in her introduction to *The Tales We Tell: Perspectives on the Short Story*, ed. by Rick Feddersen, Susan Lohafer, Barbara Lounsberry and Mary Rohrberger (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, Praeger, 1998), pp. ix-xii. See also Erik van Achter, “Revising Theory: Poe’s Legacy in Short Story Criticism”, in *Short Story Theories: A Twenty-First-Century Perspective*, ed. by Viorica Patea (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), pp. 75-88.

2 Mary Rohrberger, *Hawthorne and the Modern Short Story: A Study in Genre* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), p. 11.

E. May put together a collection of essays that made him a powerful advocate of a genre that he described as “mythic and spiritual [...] intuitive and lyrical”.³ In these works, critics of the contemporary story found a description of what they saw and appreciated in late twentieth century stories. The scholars had what seemed to be a complete view of the form: stretching back from Frederick Barthelme and Alice Munro to Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Sherwood Anderson and Anton Chekhov, and rooted in Hawthorne’s “invention” of the genre at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

This apparently comprehensive view of the genre, however, left a crucial missing link: critics tend to ignore the end of nineteenth century, despite the fact that this period has a strong claim as a major stage — if not *the* major stage — of the form. There is of course nothing ground-breaking in such an assertion: it is well documented that the short story was enormously popular at this time, and that innumerable periodicals were publishing countless stories.⁴ It was also the time when more masters of the form were active than perhaps at any other time: Chekhov, Guy de Maupassant, Luigi Pirandello, Henry James, Mori Ōgai and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, to name just a few.⁵ The particular form of the genre has also been recognised. In 1985, Clare Hanson reminded us with force that not only was the short story of that time important, but also that it had initiated a whole tradition in itself: the “short story”, as opposed to “short fiction”.⁶

Yet compared to the wealth and importance of these stories in their time, critical appraisals of this form have been very few.⁷ The classic short

3 Charles E. May (ed.), *Short Story Theories* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1976). The quote is from Charles E. May, “The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction”, in *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. by Charles E. May (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1994), pp. 131-43 (p. 133).

4 Between 1885 and 1901 the publication numbers for cheap magazines in the United States went from 3,600 to 7,500. See Andrew Levy, *The Culture and Commerce of the American Short Story* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). In Europe, the figures are maybe even more impressive: in Italy alone, about 1,800 periodicals were published in 1891; in France, several papers had a circulation of nearly one million by 1900. On all this, and on the consequences for the form itself, see Part II.

5 Throughout the book, Japanese names will be given following the academic habit of using the surname first followed by the given name.

6 “Throughout this period [1880-1980], despite the development of Symbolist and Modernist short story forms, the ‘traditional’ tale continued to appear. Indeed, the major point which I wish to make about this period is that it is possible to distinguish in it two quite separate lines of development in the short story”. Clare Hanson, *Short Stories and Short Fictions, 1880-1980* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), p. 5.

7 The form widely studied is that which is, to use May’s words, “essential and seldom

story tradition is often dismissed, in one word, as pertaining only to the “naturalistic” story — or as being, in Rohrberger’s words, only “simple narrative”.⁸ Only a few writers have had their stories studied in any detail, while the short stories of Naturalists like Émile Zola, Gerhart Hauptmann and Giovanni Verga — so influential across Europe — have been largely ignored, as have Leonid Andreyev, Nikolai Leskov and Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin. Even Pirandello and Maupassant’s short stories have been paid only cursory glances. And even for the authors that are the focus of short story studies, only a handful of their stories are analysed. To take Chekhov as an example, only a few of his stories, especially from the later period of his career, from *Dama s sobachkoi* (*Lady with Lapdog*, 1899) to *Nevest* (*Betrothed*, 1903, his last story), are widely cited, even though he wrote a hundred or so stories in his “major” period alone — these “epiphanic” stories have become the focus of analysis rather than his “classic” stories.⁹

As a global study of the classic form was still missing, I undertook to concentrate on the short story at this time of its greatest efflorescence, across a number of different countries and languages, working with a corpus of more than a thousand stories. This research led me to see that this “classic” short story, albeit with infinitely various surface features, was built on a constant structure, had a characteristic relationship with its readers, and a generic outlook on its subject. This was nearly universal. It

read”. Charles E. May, “Why Short Stories Are Essential and Why They Are Seldom Read”, in *The Art of Brevity: Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis*, ed. by Per Winther, Jakob Lothe and Hans H. Skei (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), pp. 14-25. The “classic” short story, written by artists that have been extraordinarily influential in their time, and which was universally read, is scarcely studied. Hanson’s work is a brilliant exception, but she writes on English writers alone, and soon proceeds to the description of “short fiction” rather than the classic short story. My research concurs with many of her results: from the characters “tend[ing] to be viewed externally”, to the subject tending to be “the strange [...] in human personality”, to the “narrative symmetry”, and the importance of plot in these classic stories, and to the fact that the stories depend “on a fundamental agreement between reader and writer”. See Hanson (1985), p. 6.

- 8 May argues that “The narrative and description in the first two thirds of the story [James Joyce’s *The Dead*] suggests that the story will end naturalistically with the end of the party. However [...]”. Charles E. May, “The Secret Life in the Modern Short Story”, in *Contemporary Debates on the Short Story*, ed. by José R. Ibáñez, José Francisco Fernández and Carmen M. Bretones (Bern: Lang, 2007), pp. 207-25 (p. 217). Rohrberger draws the distinction between the short story as “epiphany” and the “simple narrative”. Mary Rohrberger, “Origins, Development, Substance, and Design of the Short Story: How I Got Hooked on the Short Story and Where It Led Me”, in *The Art of Brevity* (2004), pp. 1-13 (p. 5).
- 9 This is after a very prolific period in the “small press”, to which Chekhov contributed under a pseudonym more than five hundred stories and anecdotes.

was not a question of giving a *definition* of the short story: many critics have stressed that this would not be very interesting, even if it were possible. It was a question of describing the tools of brevity in this particular form, and the relationship between the reader, the author, and the spectacle that one puts before the other. This survey showed that Chekhov and James, even in their greatest stories, used the same tools as Maupassant or Verga. Chekhov's *Lady with Lapdog* is making a particularly powerful use of the antithetic structure common to classic short stories; James's *The Figure in the Carpet* is particularly representative of the paroxystic representation of short story characters.¹⁰

To test my hypothesis, and disengage the in-depth characteristics of this form, the first requirement seemed to me to survey in detail an international selection of the "greatest" short story authors. I chose to look at the entire body of stories of five major authors, one in each of the languages with which I was familiar (French, Russian, Italian, English and Japanese): Maupassant, Chekhov, Verga, James and Akutagawa. Maupassant was an obvious choice as he has largely been figured by critics as the master of the "classic" short story, as well as Chekhov, who is seen to embody "short fiction" (or the "modern" short story as I call it).¹¹ Verga was also an obvious choice, because he is such a popular author in his home country and because, unlike many classic short story writers, his work has been analysed by great critics from Luigi Russo to Leo Spitzer and the progressive Marxists.¹² James was not only central to the discussion of the form by Anglophone critics, but also made what is maybe the most exquisite use of the form. In Japan, Mori Ōgai was my first choice, since he was one of the greatest authors of the time; but instead I decided to focus on Akutagawa because, like Maupassant and Chekhov, he wrote both "classic" stories and "short fiction".¹³

10 Considering that I am treating short stories as works of art in their own right, and that they are often published separately, I have italicised their titles rather than putting them in inverted commas. When I am speaking of a cycle or sequence of short stories, I shall say so.

11 It is difficult in English to find a word to specify this type of short story without entering into the debate on "modernism/postmodernism". What I mean by "modern" is a story that renounces the anecdote, and thus, the "classic" format. I discuss this in detail in the book's epilogue.

12 I also looked at the complete short works of Pirandello, because it was interesting to see that even an author who was central to the renewal of the theatrical form used the most "classic" tools when writing short stories.

13 Akutagawa's career began a little later than the others: his first texts date from 1914.

The second step was to place these great authors in the context of their time: to read Maupassant along with Alphonse Daudet, and James along with Rudyard Kipling. More importantly, I decided to read them in the same place as the audience of the time: in the newspapers and the intellectual journals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was more fruitful than I could have imagined. First, it allowed me to see these stories in the vicinity of the other genres of the newspapers (chronicles, reports, anecdotes, etc), with which they have interesting resemblances and differences. Secondly, it explained what is maybe the essential feature of the “classic” short story: its exoticism. Most of these stories deal with characters that are in some ways removed from the reader (either by place, time, race or class).

“Modern” short stories that follow less generic conventions may very well be more satisfying for twenty-first century readers than the classic form. Throughout this book, I shall not shy away from acknowledging the classic short story’s limitations: these stories can be extraordinarily powerful, but the form is also somewhat stifling. However, the very fact that the greatest authors of the time abundantly and continuously produced classic short stories should draw our attention to the possibilities of the form. They did great things with potentially restrictive structural “laws”. In doing so, they were part of a democratisation of literature: this was a form that could be read, like the serial, by a large number of readers — but which could also give quick, swift pleasure to readers accustomed to more demanding writing.

The authors that I am focussing on in this book participated in the Naturalist period’s criticism of what they perceived to be the backward state of their countries. Verga and Chekhov published throughout their lives in intellectual journals (*tolstye zhurnaly* or “thick journals” as they were called in Russia) where their stories were side-by-side with austere articles about science and statistics, and their possible application to ease the nation’s poverty. Maupassant and the French Naturalists, from Paul Alexis to Zola, published in newspapers that sometimes bore the very title of *Le Progrès* (*The Progress*), and the transformation of the nation was paramount in their minds. The short story gave them a powerful tool for denunciation of a state of society they felt was unbearable. Yet paradoxically these stories often played the role of reinforcing the social — and sometimes racial — prejudices of the reader. It was precisely this drawback that led to the form’s deconstruction in the twentieth century. The greatness of the

authors studied in this book lies in their having become sensible to this stifling effect of the classic form, and having opened new avenues to the genre. Maupassant, for example, experimented with the form in his tales of madness and Chekhov wrote stories based on a dilemma, thus putting into question the very idea of a stable, affirmative self and the superiority of one "voice" over the others. But this should not lead us to forget that this was only one part of their work, and that they also led long and admirable careers as "classic" short story writers.

This book shall approach the classic short story from three different and complementary perspectives: its structure; its site of first publication; and the relationship it creates between author, reader and characters. Part I is dedicated to structure. In Chapter One, we shall see that characterisation in the short story is always paroxystic. There are few narrative elements in the classic short story but every trait is there in its extreme form; even mediocre men are mediocre *par excellence*. Chapter Two will show that 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). This is the essential point from which to understand the "twist-in-the-tail", which will be the focus of Chapter Three. 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. Chapter Four will analyse the means through which the short story accelerates our 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.

The second part of the book will analyse the short story within the framework of the media in which it first appeared: newspapers and intellectual journals. Chapter Six presents a detailed review of the mostly expensive, elegant periodicals that were the primary publishing outlet for the short stories of our corpus. These stories that focus on peasants, poor office workers, prostitutes and provincials were for the most part read by wealthy urbanites. These periodicals also published travelogues — which will be the focus of Chapter Seven — in which a chronicler introduced

his readers to a foreign country. Often the writers in our corpus wrote “factual” travelogues at the same time as their fictional stories, creating in both a similar distance between the reader and the exotic characters being depicted.

It is this distance that will be the focus of the final section of the book: Part III looks at the relationship between the reader, the author and the characters of the classic short story. The main feature of the genre is its *monologism* — only the author (or narrator) has a full and autonomous voice, whereas the characters in all their “otherness” are put at a distance. Chapters Eight and Nine will concentrate on rhetorical devices that are used to create distance from the characters — even though many of these devices (such as the use of direct speech and dialect) are often thought of as creating intimacy. Chapter Ten looks at the intermediary role the narrator and/or the “reflector” play in creating the sense of distance between reader and author, as the reader joins with the (reliable) narrator to “look down” upon the other characters in the tale. Chapter Eleven attempts to define the special kind of emotion aroused in the short story. Although the reader may feel sympathy for certain characters, our compassion almost never results from a true understanding; they are never our equals, but are doomed to represent social or psychological types. The conclusion to Part III will show that even the short stories of Dostoevsky — the herald of polyphony — are still monological. Monologism is not a feature of our authors but of the genre itself.

The epilogue to the book will hint at the way in which the short story would transform itself out of its effective but restrictive framework into the twentieth century. The stories I call “modern”, as opposed to “classic”, renounce most of the traits described in this book. Structure is no longer based on antitheses and paroxysms, and, most importantly, polyphony can re-enter the scene. When the nineteenth-century belief in reason and progress gave way to a fundamental uncertainty about the subject, the short story lost its firm grasp on easily defined characters. Instead of telling neatly manufactured little tales, it preferred to turn to the exploration of uncertain and complex minds.

PART I: STRUCTURE

1. Paroxysmic Characterisation

At the end of the nineteenth century, through the influence of Naturalism, literature was striving to become the “science of the human heart”, and as a consequence many critics and writers began to condemn rhetoric.¹ In *The Experimental Novel* (1880), using Claude Bernard as a guide, Émile Zola called his fellow writers to become “observers” in the spirit of the physiologist.² He urged writers to renounce rhetoric, if not style: “The observer relates purely and simply the phenomena which he has under his eyes... He should be the photographer of phenomena, his observation should be an exact representation of nature”.³ As a consequence, the period’s motto was “simplicity”. The ancient school of writing began to be identified with rhetorical pomposity,⁴ and Zola’s call for the aesthetics of “slice of life” Naturalism is well known:

1 See, for example, Giovanni Verga, *The She-Wolf and Other Stories*, trans. by Giovanni Cecchetti (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 87 (hereafter Cecchetti). For the original Italian, see Giovanni Verga, *Tutte le Novelle*, ed. by Carla Ricciardi, 2 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1983), I, p. 192 (hereafter Ricciardi). Verga is one of the greatest proponents of this radical Italian Naturalist school of Verism.

2 See Émile Zola, *The Experimental Novel, and Other Essays*, trans. by Belle M. Sherman (New York: Cassell, 1893); and Claude Bernard, *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*, trans. by Henry Copley Greene (Birmingham, AL: Classics of Medicine Library, 1980). Zola said, “I only repeat what I have said before, that apart from the matter of form and style, the experimental novelist is only one special kind of savant, who makes use of the tools of all other savants, observation and analysis” (p. 50).

3 Ibid, p. 6.

4 “We are actually rotten with lyricism; we are very much mistaken when we think that

Instead of imagining an adventure, of complicating it, of arranging stage effects, which scene by scene will lead to a final conclusion, you simply take the life study of a person or a group of persons, whose actions you faithfully depict. The work becomes a *report*, nothing more; it has but the merit of exact observation, of more or less profound penetration and analysis, of the logical connection of facts. Sometimes, even, it is not an entire life, with a commencement and an ending, of which you tell; it is only a *scrap of an existence*, a few years in the life of a man or a woman, a single page in a human history, which has attracted the novelist in the same way that the special study of a mineral can attract a chemist.⁵

The short story writers, even outside the Naturalist school, readily adopted this new stripped-back aesthetic.⁶

This is, of course, very different from the preceding period of the short story genre: Goethe had characterised his *Novelle* as ‘a peculiar and as yet unheard-of event’,⁷ while Edgar Allan Poe had defined it through its *effect* on the reader, stressing the necessity of both the unity and the intensity of this artificial product of human art.⁸ The end of the nineteenth century, to the contrary, proclaims its essential simplicity. Critics, theoreticians and writers (often one and the same) insist firmly that the short story should renounce all artifice, and that it should tell simple things simply: Anton Chekhov claimed that the short story should tell “how Peter married Mary”,⁹ and Giovanni Verga argued that the short story should be free

the characteristic of a good style is a sublime confusion with just a dash of madness added; in reality, the excellence of a style depends upon its logic and clearness” (ibid, p. 48).

5 Ibid, p. 124 (emphases mine).

6 Among the authors of our corpus only Maupassant and Verga can be said to be truly “Naturalists”, although, as we shall see in Part III, that conscience of contributing to progress was shared by most short story writers of the time.

7 Johann Peter Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe*, trans. by John Oxenford, ed. by J. K. Moorhead (London: Dent, 1930), p. 163. The original German reads “[...] denn was ist *Novelle* anders als eine sich ereignete, unerhörte Begebenheit”. Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1981), p. 207.

8 “Having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out, [the skilful literary artist] then invents such incidents — he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect.” Edgar Allan Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, ed. by Gary R. Thompson (New York: The Library of America, 1984).

9 Chekhov’s saying, that appeared in a book of souvenirs of Chekhov by Alexander Kuprin, is often quoted, for example in Sean O’Faolain, *The Short Story* (Cork: Mercier, 1948), p. 100. “Why write”, Chekhov wondered, “about a man getting into a submarine [...] while his beloved at that moment throws herself with a hysterical shriek from the belfry? All this is untrue and does not happen in reality. One must write about simple things: how Peter Semionovitch married Marie Ivanovna. That is all”. Maxim Gorky, Alexander Kuprin and A. I. Bunin, *Reminiscences of Anton Chekhov*, trans. by S. S. Koteliansky and Leonard Woolf (New York: Huebsch, 1921), p. 80. Available at <http://archive.org/details/>

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