

# THE MODERNIST SHORT STORY

*A study in theory and practice*

DOMINIC HEAD

*School of English  
Birmingham Polytechnic*



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The modernist period saw a revolution in fictional practice, most famously in the work of novelists such as Joyce and Woolf. Dominic Head shows that the short story, with its particular stress on literary artifice, was a central site for modernist innovation. Working against a conventional approach and towards a more rigorous and sophisticated theory of the genre, using a framework drawn from Althusser and Bakhtin, he examines the short story's range of formal effects, such as the disunifying function of ellipsis and ambiguity. Separate chapters on Joyce, Woolf and Katherine Mansfield highlight their strategies of formal dissonance, involving a conflict of voices within the narrative. A chapter on Wyndham Lewis explores the use of the form to enact the aesthetics of Vorticism, resulting in the impasse of isolationism in its view of the individual. By contrast, Malcolm Lowry's stories are shown as offering a means of transcending this, in their very different treatment of the individual's experience. Finally, Dominic Head's challenging conclusion takes the implications of his study into the age of postmodernism.

# THE MODERNIST SHORT STORY

*For my parents, Peggy and Victor, and for Tricia*

## Preface

At a time when the theory and criticism of literature has achieved an extraordinary level of complexity and specialization, it is curious to find a major literary genre – the modern short story – that has *not* been subjected to the systematic attentions of literary theory. A welcome recent development has been the increase in outlets (including specialist journals) for articles on the genre, but book-length surveys remain scarce, and relatively unsophisticated: where the theory of the novel runs to countless volumes, short story theory comprises no more than a handful of occasional works from which no developing aesthetic emerges. What *does* emerge from existing short story theory, such as it is, is a static notion of the genre's unity – its supposed reliance on certain unifying devices, such as a single event, straightforward characterization, a coherent 'moment of revelation' – from which an easily identifiable 'point' can be recognized.

This book argues, to the contrary, that the short story incorporates *disunifying* devices which are seminal features of the literary effects produced in the genre; a theoretical frame drawn from the work of (particularly) Althusser and Bakhtin is used to suggest a way of accounting for the formal and narrative disruptions discoverable in the short story.

The apparent perversity of this approach – this taking issue with the existing poetics of a literary genre – appears in a very different light when one considers the nature of the modernist project, and its seminal role in the development of the modern short story: as successive chapters argue, the formal conflicts and dissonances essential to the innovations of the major

modernist writers are equally crucial to their short stories, stories which have had a formative influence on the genre in its modern phase. The reverse side of this observation receives emphasis too: the short story shows itself, through its formal capacities, to be a quintessentially modernist form. Ultimately, the extended argument of this work has two (related) foci: a plea for a more rigorous theorizing of the short story, and the claim that the genre ought to be seen as centrally involved in the modernist revolution in fictional practice.



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Tricia Head read through the entire manuscript, in an earlier form, and made many helpful suggestions. I also received much useful advice from the referees approached by Kevin Taylor at Cambridge University Press, whose skilful management of the project was essential to its transition to book form. My greatest debts are to my parents, Peggy and Victor Head, for their unfailing support and encouragement, and to Tricia, without whom this work could not have been undertaken.

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## CHAPTER I

### *The short story: theories and definitions*

The rise of the modern short story in the 1880s and 1890s indicates that the written story enjoyed a period of significant development – arguably the birth of a new kind of short story – which was concurrent with the emergence of literary modernism.<sup>1</sup> This concurrence is more than circumstantial: there are various connections between the formal properties and capacities of the short story and the new ways of representing the social world displayed in modernist fiction. This survey seeks to investigate the nature of the relationship between modernism and the short story, an area, strangely neglected by critics, which has important resonances both in terms of literary history, and in defining the role of fiction-making in the twentieth century: the short story encapsulates the essence of literary modernism, and has an enduring ability to capture the episodic nature of twentieth-century experience.

I am proposing a connection between the generic capacities of the short story and the way in which writers have depicted their social world, a connection which stems from a special kind of literary experience relevant to readers, as well as to writers, of short stories. L. P. Hartley, discussing the status of the short story in the 1960s, noted how readers were apt to ‘devour them singly on a news[s]heet’, but would be disinclined to read them in collections. The reason for this was (and is) the ‘unusual concentration’ the genre demands, a concentration which permits no respite in a *series* of short stories because “‘starting and stopping” exhausts the reader’s attention just as starting and stopping uses up the petrol in a car’.<sup>2</sup> Hartley’s yardstick was the comparatively favourable fate of the novel, and this

same comparison – novel versus short story – has proved pervasive in short story criticism, as we shall see. The main point here, however, is Hartley's emphasis on a unique kind of attention demanded by the short story. Susan Lohafer writes that short stories 'put us *through* something – reality warp is the shorthand for it', and this may be the best shorthand definition we can come up with, indicating as it does two key elements of the short story: its intensity and its exaggerated artifice.<sup>3</sup>

The remainder of this opening chapter examines short story theory and indicates how the critical field has been dominated by a simplified 'single effect' doctrine, derived from Edgar Allan Poe, which invites a reunifying approach to familiar short story characteristics such as ellipsis, ambiguity and resonance. A different methodology is then outlined which acknowledges and interprets the *disunifying* effects of ellipsis and ambiguity, indicating how this kind of disruption establishes a connection between text and context. This methodology is particularly helpful in approaching the modernist short story because there is a stress on literary artifice in the short story which intensifies the modernist preoccupation with formal innovation. The approach indicates how form and context work together, how experimentation is the linchpin of modernism and of the social perspectives it offers. This premise and its theoretical foundation are tested in the body of the book, which comprises five author-specific chapters – on James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Wyndham Lewis and Malcolm Lowry – in which close readings of major modernist stories are made.

Any attempt to define a literary form has to mediate between conflicting requirements. The impulse to provide a terse, aphoristic description, based on empirical formal characteristics, must be tempered by an historical understanding: literary forms are continually evolving, even when they rely heavily on conventional gesture and device. Thus a *single* definition of the short story is both inaccurate and inappropriate: the diachronic perspective should always qualify the synchronic observation. The valid, historical definition of a literary form, therefore, examines *prevailing tendencies* rather than essential qualities, and

the current work, taken as a whole, is an extended attempt to define the modernist short story by accounting for the adaptation, in a particular era, of certain perceived generic qualities. Before beginning this extended analysis, however, it is necessary to consider the prevailing tendencies of the short story as an emerging modern form, and in this field of genre criticism extant scholarship is both a help and a hindrance.

Various attempts have been made to establish a taxonomy of modern prose forms, and a major problem with much of this work is its failure to account fully for the mutable, evolving nature of genre.<sup>4</sup> Susan Lohafer's book on the short story, though an important work in the field, is representative of this failure, based as it is on an avowed 'interest' which 'is not historical but generically aesthetic'.<sup>5</sup> However, much short story criticism engages with the form as an emergent, modern one (conceived in the nineteenth century) and so the qualities described can quite properly be appropriated as historically specific tendencies.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, this criticism also describes a tradition which was the immediate inheritance of the modernists, a tradition which they questioned and subverted. Short story criticism, then, locates itself historically (often inadvertently) because it deals with a young form. The following survey of short story theory is designed to locate certain tendencies which were often modified and adapted by the modernists. Inevitably, such a survey is not in accord with the monolithic tendency of some of the critical work examined.

The most obvious problem facing the short story critic concerns narrative length, and this problem is usually tackled by a quantitative distinction between novel and story. This approach is epitomized in an important essay by Mary Pratt, who proceeds from the premise that 'shortness cannot be an intrinsic property of anything, but occurs only relative to something else'. Pratt takes the novel as the yardstick which 'has through and through conditioned both the development of the short story and the critical treatment of the short story', and, in doing so, she replicates the bias she analyses: she allows her *own* critical approach to be governed by the novel which supplies her with a neat, but reductive, binary opposition. This

results in a very distorted definition of story, a conviction that a 'hierarchical relation' obtains between novel and story. It is the use of this extrinsic 'hierarchical relation' to account for 'the *practice* of the short story' as being somehow 'conditioned' by its relation to the novel, as the smaller and lesser genre' that is particularly dubious.<sup>7</sup>

The assumption that short story length is relative only to the novel is plainly inadequate, and applies, again, to a hidebound critical purview more than it does to fictional practice. A story offers a *short* experience in comparison with many things – watching a film, for instance – and the novel is only one point of comparison, however important. Any comparison based purely on quantity serves only to reinforce an unreasoning 'bigger-is-better' value judgement, and to obscure the main issue: the length question must be secondary to a consideration of *technique*. It is only when quantity and technique are examined together, as mutually dependent factors, that quantity acquires any significance. So, although E. M. Forster's assertion that 'any fictitious prose work over 50,000 words' constitutes a novel has provided a rough basis for distinguishing novels from short fictions,<sup>8</sup> we must still concur with Norman Friedman that a measure based purely on a word-count 'is a misleading one because it centres on symptoms rather than causes'.<sup>9</sup> Anthony Burgess suggests a (more suitable) holistic approach when he claims that in the Sherlock Holmes stories of Conan Doyle we witness 'the story doing a kind of novelistic job and doing it briefly'.<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Bowen makes a similar point about the stories of Henry James and Thomas Hardy: 'their shortness is not positive; it is nonextension. They are great architects' fancies, little buildings on an august plan'.<sup>11</sup> The charge here rests on an over-intricacy of plot, a problem which identifies a fundamental structural divergence. Short story critics generally agree that in the novel 'the dramatic events...are linked together by the principle of causality', as in the Holmes stories, or in the stylized folk-talkes of Hardy. A little-known collection of short fiction by G. B. Stern, entitled *Long Story Short*, constitutes a practical investigation of the implications of length and technique in the story. The most significant feature about the pieces in this volume is their complexity of plot. They are far

more involved and convoluted than is usual, a fact indicated in the collection's title: these plots have been artificially compressed – they are long stories rendered short. The prime example is 'The Uncharted Year', a 7,000-word fiction with a fantastically complicated plot, but which contains nothing else: the experiment results in a thin surface narrative – pure anecdote – with a trite moral tacked on at the end, in an attempt to give the piece a depth its structure cannot support.<sup>12</sup>

There is general critical consensus that the genuine short story severely restricts its scope for plot or action, and concentrates rather on reiteration through pattern. The short story, according to this view, involves only 'one dramatic event', with other subordinate events which 'facilitate the understanding of the main event'.<sup>13</sup> Hierarchical comparisons between novel and story have also proved inviting over this issue of action and its scale. Mary Pratt has summarized this comparative exercise in which 'to some extent, the moment of truth stands as a model for the short story the way the life stands as a model for the novel'. The 'hierarchical relation' between the two genres, in the critical literature, results in a tendency to view the restricted action of the story as feeble novelistic imitation:

The identification of the short story form with moment of truth plot was to some degree prescribed by the prior association between the novel form and the life. The lurking associations are these: if the short story is not a 'full-length' narrative it cannot narrate a full-length life: it can narrate a fragment or excerpt of a life. And if from that fragment one can deduce things about the whole life, then the more novel-like, the more complete, the story is.<sup>14</sup>

The 'lurking associations' here are those of a critical prejudice which favours the novel as the fictional norm, a view of the novel which is obviously vulnerable: the identification between novel and full-length life is clearly inadequate, especially in relation to the modernist novel. It is sometimes claimed that the unit of time in modernist fiction is the day, whereas in nineteenth-century fiction it is the year.<sup>15</sup> One can compare *Mrs Dalloway* with *Under the Greenwood Tree*, *Ulysses* with *Emma*. Naturally this is not a hard-and-fast rule, but it does indicate a general shift in the treatment of time. It is interesting to note

that *Mrs Dalloway* and *Ulysses* were both originally conceived as short stories. Even in their final forms both novels hinge on single significant events – Clarissa Dalloway's party, the meeting of Bloom and Stephen – the episodes around which these books are structured. In their suggestion, through limited action, of the full-length life, *Ulysses* and *Mrs Dalloway* are representative of a tendency common in modernist literature, and a tendency particularly well suited to the short story. The question of length is relevant here, but in a way which actually reverses the formula identified by Pratt. Many readers, for instance, may find the extended, piecemeal evocation of character in early twentieth-century fiction tedious. Virginia Woolf's novel *Jacob's Room* would be an extreme example of this formless technique that may be better suited to short fiction. The modernist story, in other words, may be seen to contain the distilled essence of the modernist novel, at least as far as it is usually perceived.

A conventional distinction between novel and story – the whole life, or the crucial year, against the single episode – might, then, also apply to the most obvious differences between the nineteenth-century novel and modernist fiction in general (and the modernist story in particular). This evolving opposition reinforces the notion of genre as contextually variable, but it also indicates a major fault with the simple novel/story opposition: the modernist story, far from being 'smaller and lesser' in any technical sense, actually exemplifies the strategies of modernist fiction.

The taxonomy of prose forms is complicated by the introduction of a third term – novella – which occupies a mid-ground between novel and story.<sup>16</sup> Although the term itself is problematic, the theory which accompanies it is helpful in basing distinctions on matters other than length. Judith Leibowitz, in her *Narrative Purpose in the Novella*, is concerned with 'the functions served by techniques in specific contexts', and establishes a scale of technical function for the three prose forms: she claims that the narrative task of the novel is 'elaboration', while that of the short story is 'limitation'. Narrative purpose in the novella, characterized as 'compression', combines the two in such a way as to give a 'double effect



of intensity and expansion'.<sup>17</sup> This apparent contradiction in terms centres on the novella's dependence on a 'theme-complex', the development of interrelated motifs which suggest an outward expansion of thematic concern, even while a limited focus is maintained. A parallel device is 'repetitive structure' which also suggests thematic expansion through a redevelopment of ideas and situations.<sup>18</sup> Such techniques, according to Leibowitz, enable Thomas Mann (for example) to imply (without stating and without shifting focus) that the personal dissolution of Aschenbach in *Death in Venice* is indicative of the downward path of all civilization.<sup>19</sup> Leibowitz's distinction between short story and novella may be unworkable: the use of theme-complex and repetitive structure are relevant, to some extent, to the shortest fiction examined in this survey. Yet this foregrounding of technique – the cultivation of expression through form – accurately locates the central tendency of modernist short fiction.<sup>20</sup>

This coincidence between the modernist preoccupation with form and the capacity of the story is significant, and is only one of several such correspondences. The modernists' compression of time and dependence on symbolism are the two most obvious parallels: the short form often implies the typicality of a specific episode, while narrative limitation demands oblique expression through image and symbol.

Beyond these obvious parallels, the artifice of the story, particularly amenable to the artistic self-consciousness of the modernists, has further implications for the presentation of material: reception and analysis proceed from a grasp of pattern, of juxtaposition and simultaneity. Michael Chapman makes this point through comparison, as one might expect, with a notional novelistic convention:

Discussion of the novel usually proceeds most fruitfully by way of a detailed consideration of surface structure (which is syntagmatic and governed by temporal and causal relations); shorter fiction with greater immediacy signals deep structure (paradigmatic and based upon elements... which are not in themselves narrative).<sup>21</sup>

The artifice of the short story facilitates another modernist preoccupation: the analysis of personality, especially a con-