

FORMS *of the* NOVELLA

Ten
Short
Novels

 David H. Richter 

Forms of the Novella

Ten Short Novels

David H. Richter

Queens College of The City University of New York



Alfred A. Knopf, New York

To the memory of Anne Hirsch and Sarah Ehrlich

This is a Borzoi Book
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Preface

Novellas are sophisticated but accessible works of fiction that, although relatively brief, often attain much of the variety and breadth of scope of full-length novels. Because they give rise to nearly as much discussion as lengthier works and can be read, even re-read, in the limited time at the student's disposal, novellas make ideal texts for courses in fiction.

Any anthology is likely to reflect the tastes and prejudices of its editor. This one is no exception, but other principles have operated here as well. I have tried to strike an appropriate balance between the unusual and the commonplace, for one thing. Included are four classic and popular novellas (*Billy Budd*, *Heart of Darkness*, *The Dead*, and *The Metamorphosis*); three others that are more rarely seen (*The Overcoat*, *The Aspern Papers*, and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*); and three excellent novellas that have not, as far as I know, been previously anthologized (*The Awakening*, *St. Mawr*, and *The Crying of Lot 49*). The historical range runs from the mid-nineteenth century to the present; the range of forms—including melodrama and tragedy, satire and fable—is that of the genre as a whole. Two of the novellas are by women, and several others touch strongly on feminist issues. Only two of the novellas are translations—those by Gogol and Kafka; for both I have chosen the best available English rendering. And I have tried to select the best editions of the English-language texts—for example, the definitive Hayford-Sealts edition of *Billy Budd*. I have added, where necessary, brief footnotes to explain proper names, foreign phrases, and technical terms not found in college dictionaries.

The introduction, somewhat more extensive than in similar collections, is a guide to the formal analysis of fiction, particularly the novella forms included in this anthology. It is designed to serve as a dictionary of critical terms that are used to discuss fiction and discriminate among its various forms, effects, and techniques. More than this, it aspires to provide a coherent method of analyzing fiction that relates the choices of plot structure, characterization, values, language, and narrative technique to the artistic purpose they serve. It may be read sequentially or sampled in easy stages.

The headnotes that precede each novella aim to convey a sense of the author's life, career, and principal concerns. These too are somewhat fuller than in comparable textbooks. Each headnote also includes a brief and selective bibliography, intended as a guide for the student in further study or research, giving (1) the most reliable edition in which to read the rest of the author's works; (2) the best or most recent full-fledged biographies; (3) studies of the author's work as a whole; and (4) criticism of the anthologized novella.

No one carries a project of this size to completion without a great deal of assistance from institutions and individuals. My research and textual transcriptions took place at the Paul Klapper Library of Queens College, the library of the University of Cincinnati, the Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago, and the Robarts Library of the University of Toronto. Much of the manuscript was typed by the Word Processing Service of Queens College under the able direction of Pearl Sigberman, and by the ever-helpful secretaries of the English Department, Ruth Stern, Helen Gross, and Ruth Kurke. Colleagues and friends who have read parts of the manuscript at some stage of its preparation, or who have contributed helpful suggestions, include Professor Brian Corman, Erindale College, University of Toronto; Dr. Margaret Ehrhart; Professor Wayne Franklin, University of Iowa; Professor Daniel Howard, Rutgers University; Professor Donald McQuade, Queens College; Professor James H. Pickering, Michigan State University; Ms. Jonna Gormely Semeiks; and Professor Mary Doyle Springer, St. Mary's College. The contents and style of this work owe much to the generosity of these scholars; any errors and blunders are my own. This book would have been impossible, of course, without the assistance, the faith, and at times the prodding, of the editorial staff of the College Department of Alfred A. Knopf; let me single out for mention, among the many who have worked on this project, Richard Garretson, David Follmer, Christine Pellicano, and John Sturman. Finally, I have dedicated this book to the memory of my two aunts, Anne Hirsch and Sarah Ehrlich, who, while this was in progress, were taken from me to what I hope is a *lichtigen gan-edén*.

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New York, N.Y.

*Forms
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Introduction

Most of us read fiction, at times at any rate, as a form of escape. We turn to novels to give us what our daily existence often lacks: romance, adventure, and above all a sense of coherence. Much of what any of us knows of human nature is learned through fiction—movies and television programs as well as short stories, novellas, and novels—any narrative that creates characters, people like ourselves or different, and shows them in action. Fiction exposes us to ideas we would otherwise have never encountered, to ways of life that have vanished, to places we will never visit and people we will never meet. Fiction is literally untrue, yet it teaches us as well as scientific treatises do.

Prose fiction narratives teach us especially well because there we can know the characters from within. We know Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Joyce's *Stephen Dedalus* better than we can know any human being, with the possible exception of ourselves, for we know their secret thoughts and desires, which even the people we know most intimately usually hide. And novels are excellent teachers because we read them rather than passively see them. To enter the author's world, we must exercise our own imaginations and build for ourselves the fictional world that exists only as black marks upon white paper. And the imagined worlds authors force us to construct for ourselves are more powerful, somehow, than those that a film director can create for us, for we have invested our own mental energies in building them.

The understanding or analysis of fiction is nothing more or less than seeing it as a created experience, moving us to appropriate emotions or convincing us of its ideas, through the means of action, character, and technique. People sometimes talk as if analyzing fiction destroys the enjoyment it gives us. But unless we have enjoyed a fiction, unless we have responded to it and been moved by its imaginative re-creation of life, we cannot begin to analyze it, for we will lack that intuitive appreciation of the artist's intention that is the basis for any critical understanding. Analysis will make us less naive about the sources of a

novel's power, but not less willing to put ourselves under its spell again. Analysis is our tribute to the author, to the artistic choices that shaped the work we have enjoyed, and to which we will return for pleasure or solace.

I. What Is a Novella? The Problem of Magnitude

Fiction, like breakfast cereal and detergent, is packaged in different sizes: small, medium, and large. The short story and the novel are the small and large packages; the terms "novella" and "short novel" designate the middle size. The tales in this collection run between 14,000 and 65,000 words—from twice the length of the average short story to half the length of the average novel. While one occasionally encounters precise quantitative definitions of the novella (15,000 to 50,000 words is one popular formula), numerical boundaries are by nature arbitrary and uninformative. Like middle age, the middle size in fiction is more a matter of character than of numbers.

At the same time, as Norman Friedman has shown, quantity does have an impact on qualities, and magnitude, measured in a more significant way than the counting of words, plays a large part in determining the powers and limits of literary forms. The four following levels of magnitude, moving from the smallest to the largest, are of importance in analyzing literature:

1. *Speech* A *speech* is the continuous utterance of a single character in a closed situation (a situation is "closed" when no new characters or facts are introduced from beginning to end). Most lyric poems are of this magnitude.
2. *Scene* The interaction of two or more characters in a closed situation is called a *scene*. Many dramatic poems are of this order of magnitude, as are many short stories—such as Edgar Allan Poe's "A Cask of Amontillado" and Ernest Hemingway's "A Clean Well-Lighted Place."
3. *Episode* An *episode* consists of two or more scenes that lead to a culminating incident. At this level we find narrative poems, most one-act plays, and most short stories. The culminating incident, which can

be used to portray a surprising twist of fate, to convey a poignant or ironic revelation of character, or to drive home a significant idea or thesis, is responsible for the characteristic effects of the short story.

4. *Plot or Story Line* A plot is a system of episodes linked through probability, often involving a major change in the fortunes or the consciousness of the protagonist. Most full-length plays, epic poems, novellas, and novels are of this level of magnitude, with complex lines of probability that work to produce or impede the major change.

While these distinctions suggest that there is a genuine difference in magnitude between the short story on the one hand and the novella and the novel on the other, the two latter forms cannot be so easily distinguished. Other elements in the study and analysis of fiction, however, enable us to come closer to seeing the qualitative differences that derive from their different lengths.

II. *Mimetic vs. Didactic Fiction*

"What's the point of that story?" is a question one often hears, and it is a question that the person telling an anecdote often has no idea how to deal with. Some stories have a point, in the sense that they lead the listener toward a general truth about the real world, to inculcate—or to question—the values we live by. Other stories have no point in this sense; they are told for the sake of their own inherent interest, for the sympathy or sorrow or laughter that the story itself can generate.

Literary fictions fall into these two categories as well, and most are of the latter sort—*mimetic* fictions—which represent some human experience in language for the sake of its power to inspire the appropriate emotional effect. The artist's choices of plot, characters, and language are governed by the necessity of calling up that particular sequence of feelings in his or her audience. *Didactic* fictions, on the other hand, represent human experience for the sake of altering the audience's attitudes toward the world at large. The events, the characters, and the language are chosen to maximize the impact of the author's thesis, and our emotional involvement in the fiction is subordinate to our understanding of the author's ideas, message, or thesis. Didactic fictions are structurally different from mimetic ones, and we will discuss them later on in this introduction. What follows directly concerns itself primarily with the problems relevant to the forms of mimetic fiction.

III. Mimetic Fiction

A. THE QUESTION OF THE PROTAGONIST

Most mimetic fictions have a single protagonist—the agent to whom the principal change, presented in the plot, occurs. Identifying the protagonist is crucial to any further analysis of the fiction. This is easy when the protagonist is the most “heroic” person in the story, its most sympathetic, or its narrator—but he or she may be none of these. Generally, the protagonist is that person about whom we are most made to care—though we must remember that our feelings may not be positive but negative, as in Shakespeare’s *Richard III*.

B. CHARACTERIZATION

Protagonists and the other characters who populate narratives may be presented, in E. M. Forster’s famous distinction, as either “flat” or “round.” Round characters are presented with sufficient internal complexity to be able to change, in the course of the action, without shocking us by their inconsistent behavior. Flat characters may be vivid or drab, but they are all puppets. If they act “out of character” they cease to convince us.

The presence of flat characters within a work is not a sign of poor artistry. Many minor roles do not require round characters to fill them, and the attention that complex individuals in subordinate functions would draw from the central figures might easily upset the perceived shape of the story. The Shakespeare who created Hamlet created the pasteboard Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the same play.

Characters, flat or round, may be described for us or introduced in dramatic action, leading us to deduce their character from their words and deeds. The latter seems, on the face of it, the more artistic way of proceeding, but this is not always so. It may be more economical to present a character’s description, and surely it would be no boon to the reader, whenever a dull or stupid character needed to be introduced, to present him or her being foolish and boring for pages on end till the reader got the point.

Aristotle’s strictures on character in the *Poetics* still hold good today. Characters should be functional within the plot; consistent—or, if they are round characters, at least fairly predictable in the sorts of change they undergo; true to life; and true to type (in the sense that a character

presented as a successful executive, say, should have the aggressiveness requisite to such success). Truth to life, which implies individuality, and truth to type, which implies representativeness, grind against one another a bit: which one will be emphasized generally depends on the character's function within the plot.

C. THE PROBLEM OF UNITY

Unity of plot means simply that the action or experience presented is a single action, rather than several distinct actions or a fraction of one. The classic, Aristotelian notion of a unified action is one that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The plot begins from an initially stable situation, becomes unstable, leads to further complications, and is finally resolved with the introduction of a new stability.

To take a familiar plot, that of *Hamlet*, we would have to say that the plot begins when the ghost of the late king instructs Hamlet to revenge his murder. In the "middle," the action is complicated by Hamlet's rational and irrational delays—his desire to test the ghost's veracity and Claudius's guilt; his reluctance to slay Claudius while the latter seems to be at prayer; and his mistaken killing of Polonius, which leads Claudius to arrange a counterplot against Hamlet. In the counterplot—still part of the "middle"—Hamlet escapes from the voyage to England Claudius had meant to be his last, but falls victim to Laertes's poisoned foil. As his death approaches, Hamlet stabs Claudius, completing his revenge—and the plot. With all the major agents dead, the new stability must be imposed from outside the plot by Fortinbras, the Norwegian prince who arrives to pick up the pieces.

The plot *presupposes* events that precede its beginning: the murder by Claudius of the elder Hamlet, the adultery between Gertrude and Claudius, even the birth of Prince Hamlet some thirty years before the opening of the play. But the plot does not include these events. Without the ghost's command, Hamlet might have been suspicious of his uncle, and Claudius might have been distrustful of Hamlet, but the matter would have rested there. The command, the initiating incident of the plot, is what calls Hamlet's internal and external conflicts into being. We should also note that the beginning of the plot is not at the beginning of the play; the audience watches *Hamlet* for thirty or forty minutes before the plot, properly speaking, begins. The information presented in those minutes—the disturbed state of Denmark, the uncomfortable relations between Claudius and Hamlet, Polonius's cyni-

cism about Hamlet's love for Ophelia, and so on—could be called *exposition*. But what is right for *Hamlet* is not right for every play: *King Lear* begins its plot at the very first scene, *Othello* not until the second act. And in some plays, like *Oedipus the King*, the initiating incident of the plot occurs *before* the play begins.

Prose fictions are like plays in this respect: the plot and the narrative do not necessarily open together. Sometimes a plot that requires a great deal of exposition (like that of Dickens's *Great Expectations*) will not begin until a quarter of the novel is over. Other novels open in the midst of the plot and present the beginning in flashbacks (as in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*). And novels frequently go on after the plot ends; it was practically a convention of the Victorian novel to conclude with a lengthy epilogue telling what happened to all the major characters after the end of the plot.

It is the individual work, its plot and its power, that determines the relation between action and narration, plot and its representation. But generally, the relative brevity of the novella permits less exposition than is possible in the novel, usually only a page or two before the plot begins. Epilogues are briefer, if they exist at all. And the flashback, when used in the novella, more often provides exposition for a plot already begun than it presents the first stages of the plot itself.

D. THE POWER OF THE PLOT

As we have said, the purpose of mimetic fiction is to inspire an emotional effect. But what determines these emotional effects? Here are three factors residing in the plot:

1. The moral quality of the protagonist inspires us with more or less definite *desires* regarding him or her. Depending on his or her character, and on the values the narrative sets forth, we wish the protagonist good or bad fortune, with greater or lesser ardor.
2. The events of the plot set up lines of probability that inspire us with more or less definite *expectations* regarding the protagonist's fate. We may expect him or her to have good or bad fortune, in greater or lesser degree, temporarily or permanently. We may also have indeterminate expectations, either because the author presents us with two possible fates for the protagonist or because the author keeps us in suspense without closely defining the alternatives at all.
3. The protagonist has a more or less definite degree of *responsibility* for what happens. We may be made to feel that his or her character, exercised through choices, largely determines his or her fate, or, on

the other hand, that the outcome is the result of the actions of other agents, or of Chance, or of Destiny. If the protagonist has a high degree of responsibility, then it matters whether he or she acted in full knowledge or as the result of a mistake of some sort.

The emotional impact of a narrative will, to a large extent, depend on the interrelationship of these three factors—all of them have to be taken into account. These factors allow us to make some broad generic distinctions between types of plots, and some surprisingly subtle ones. For example, the plots of most so-called romantic comedies (*Twelfth Night*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Tom Jones*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and so on) all share the feature of presenting sympathetic protagonists in actions that lead us to expect a happy ending. It is the expectation, rather than the ending itself, that leads us to read them as comedies; they have, by virtue of this expectation, a "feel" to them that is different from (say) a melodrama that chances to end happily.

For all their differences, these works are more like each other than any of them is like, for example, *Volpone* or *The Egoist*, whose plots are also called "comic." The protagonists of these two works inspire not sympathy but fascination and repugnance; we desire and expect their fall and just punishment, and a happy ending not for them but for their intended victims. The power of these works is closer to certain types of tragedy than to the romantic comedies. Tragedies like Shakespeare's *Richard III* have as protagonists fascinatingly evil villains whose desired and expected downfall transpires to the satisfaction of the audience. The main difference between the punitive plots that are called "comedies" and those called "tragedies" seems to be the degree of punishment meted out; Richard, in the "tragedy," is killed, while Volpone, in the "comedy," deserves and receives less severe returns.

E. THE FOCUS OF FATE

The factors we have just discussed—our desires, our expectations, our sense of the protagonist's degree of responsibility for what happens to him or her—all refer to the protagonist's *fate*. In many, perhaps most, plots the fate of the protagonist is primarily defined in terms of his or her fortunes or circumstances—health, social status, reputation, love relationships, and so on. In the last century or so, however, many plots have defined the fate of the protagonist in terms of a change in *consciousness*. In plots of this kind, the focus of our concern may be on the protagonist's developing capacity for making mature moral decisions

(as in Dickens's *Great Expectations*) or, conversely, on his or her ethical degeneration (as in André Gide's *The Immoralist*). Alternatively, the focus may be on a crisis, in which the protagonist's already formed moral character is tested by temptations; he or she wavers between doing right and suffering the consequences or taking an easy way out at the cost of self-contempt (as in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*). In the first two cases our concern is with positive and negative moral change realized in action; in the last case, particularly if the protagonist surmounts the temptation, the moral change is only a dreaded possibility, yet still the focus of our concern.

In still other plots of consciousness, our concern may be less with changes in *character* than with changes in *thought*. Here the focus is on the protagonist's struggle to come to terms with experience, to make meaningful sense of his or her life. In some cases the struggle is successful (as in Saul Bellow's *Herzog*), while in others the opportunity to learn and to enlarge one's world is missed by the protagonist (as in James's *The Aspern Papers*). In still others, learning takes the form of disillusionment, and our feelings about it will depend on whether the protagonist's romantic illusions are portrayed as nobler than the sordid realities he finds (as in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*) or as follies he is better off without (as in Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus*).

In some novels and novellas, the protagonist's fortunes, character, and thought are *all* altered, simultaneously or successively, and in cases of this sort it may or may not be easy to single out the primary change on which our desires and expectations are focused. In a novel like Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, for example, the protagonist, Robert Jordan, successfully surmounts a test of his ideals, but the cost will be his death in battle. In James's *The Ambassadors*, Lambert Strether refuses to betray the deepened and widened view of life he has achieved, but the cost will be loneliness and poverty. These two novels have superficially "unhappy" endings. But if these works have plots of consciousness, then we must see the price the protagonists pay as a measure of the immense value we are to place on their integrity of character or vision.

F. SIMPLE VS. COMPLEX PLOTS

Most plots are *dynamic*: they involve some change in the protagonist's situation or our understanding of it. In *simple* plots, the protagonist's situation moves from its initial to its final state along a single line of

probability: he or she moves, in a series of episodes, from triumph to triumph, ending at the height of fortune, or, conversely, degenerates successively, at each turn of events, ending in death or some lesser doom. *Complex* plots, on the other hand, employ two or more lines of probability that work against one another: the protagonist's fortune is subject to reversals at one or more points in the action. Simple plots are typical of the short story, complex plots of the novel—though there are many exceptions. The novella, which is similar to the novel in magnitude, is closer to the short story in this. Tragedy, for example, where it appears in the novella, is usually of the degenerative kind, in which a sympathetic protagonist gradually succumbs to forces beyond his or her control, ending in a doom of disillusionment or death. High comedy, high tragedy, and complex melodrama, which are found frequently in the novel, are seldom seen in the novella.

IV. Didactic Fiction

A. SATIRE AND APOLOGUE

Didactic fictions represent experience in order to alter the reader's attitudes toward the world. We can distinguish two very broad general types of didactic fiction.

Satires are works organized so as to ridicule specific targets in the real world—particular people and institutions, or traits held by groups of people or by humanity at large. Satires that run to the length of a full-scale novel are rather rare—*Gulliver's Travels* is the only one that is widely known and read, and its targets are many and varied. Satires that focus on a single important target tend to run to novella length or not much longer. Kurt Vonnegut's satire on the amorality of atomic scientists (*Cat's Cradle*), Evelyn Waugh's satire on American funeral practices (*The Loved One*), and Philip Roth's satire on Richard Nixon (*Our Gang*) are interesting modern examples of the form. The action in a satire may be loose and episodic rather than tightly organized into a plot; the characters may be unrealistic or even inconsistent. We would not find these features tolerable in a mimetic work, but in a satire, where the purpose is ridicule, they are entirely in place.

Apologues are fictions organized so as to convince the reader of the truth of a particular thesis, or doctrine, or view of the world; they are fictional imitations of arguments. Apologues vary enormously in the