

## WHAT IS A SHORT STORY BESIDES SHORT? QUESTIONING MINDS IN SEARCH OF UNDERSTANDING SHORT FICTION

GABRIELA TUCAN  
West University of Timișoara

**Abstract:** *The paper seeks to identify the cluster of essential features for a working definition of the short story, in an attempt to establish short fiction as a fully independent literary genre. I further explore the fundamental mode of thinking and of imagination generated by reading short fiction.*

**Keywords:** *counterfactual thinking, hypothetical plots, short story, structural brevity*

### 1. Introductory Remarks

The short story overthrows expectations, has undefinable but captivating effects, gives the sensation of irresistible fascination, pulsates and throbs ceaselessly, suspends motion, emphasises vigorous nuances, never exhausts the subject, focalizes an experience, throws into doubt firm ideas, defamiliarizes our assumptions, works in-depth, engulfs and snares us. The short story is intuitive, mythic, antisocial, immaterial, fragmentary, intense, mysterious, unusual, misleading, oral, and lyrical. The short story can be all this. Or it can be nothing like this. It delights into indeterminacy and resists definition. The short story is “a dissident form of communication” (March-Russell 2009:ix).

In the long tradition of short story criticism and theory, literary critics have tried to answer two deceptively straightforward questions: *what stories do* and *what makes a short story*. In principle, any attempt to establish any clear-cut underlying characteristics of the short story seems to require a narrowing definition that would certainly exclude other multiple possibilities to approach ‘short storyness’. A short story can probably be *this* but never *that*. Critics have tried to distinguish short fiction from other fictional forms by explaining why a short story is *not* a novel, a fairy tale, a sketch, or an anecdote. The real problem with these classical puzzles may be that any such definitions can only reduce the short story to a limited number of qualities by sacrificing others.

Seen in this light, other similar questions are equally difficult to answer: how can we define the effect of a short story on us or how can we recognize the constituent elements that make a short story? And what exactly makes stories unique and memorable? What gives them prominence in our life? What are the essential qualities that bring them together? In this instance, there is no simple causality. Readers often explain that they *feel* and *suspect* there is something significant in the story’s depth of implication but they just cannot pinpoint exactly what it is about. Critics often speculate on the myriad of nuances and complexities found in stories, but with no concluding evidence. The text seems to be only throwing up possible ways of reading

and interpretation. Despite the difficulty, stories *do* matter to us. Still, the short stories of our very personal collections continue to live in us and reappear in our memory with an unequal emotional force and intensity. The stories we tell are essential for our coming to terms with life, in our quest for representing reality. We make use of different narrative patterns when we tell lies, make excuses, recount small anecdotes, and so on. Arguably, however, in a story the reality encapsulated is immensely more ample than the simple anecdote that can be read and recounted in a short sitting: “a true Short-story is something other and something more than a mere story which is short” (Matthews 1994 [1901]:73). The story’s apparent simple content and the brevity of its structure have vexed and intrigued generations of readers and critics alike.

## 2. The ‘Short’ History of Short Stories

Historically, nevertheless, short fictional narrative has been seen as secondary to the novel—which has been generally considered as the dominant genre, the legitimate and more refined literary form, more ‘serious’ in scope and intentions. Thus, in the literary theoretical studies, the novel has always received extensive critical attention. It is not until 1901, when Brander Matthews wrote his first full-length analysis of short fiction, that the unique art of short stories, as particularly distinct from the one employed by novels, was the subject of extensive study. Despite this first critical attempt at establishing a tradition for short fiction, the reading public have only remembered the reviewer’s comment in the London *Academy* on B. Matthews’s study *The Philosophy of the Short Story*: “The short story is a smaller, simpler, easier, and less important form of the novel” (reprinted in “The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction,” May 1994:132).

Over the years, many other similarly sceptical critics have treated short fiction as strictly dependant on the novel, grounding their theoretical claims on the fact that there is no clear individual set of features for short stories that could distinguish them from other fictional forms:

That there is no large and distinguished corpus of short story theory because the short story does not exist as a discrete and independent genre is a hypothesis – repugnant to many, of course – that ought to be taken seriously on occasion, if only to contemplate the perspective the hypothesis provides. [...] there is no single characteristic or cluster of characteristics that the critics agree absolutely distinguishes the short story from other fictions. (Ferguson 1994:218)

In the same vein, another sceptical critic, Mary Louise Pratt (1994), claims that a working definition of the short story can only be formulated by reference to other genres, more precisely to the complex novel. This means that the relation between the two paired genres would be “highly asymmetrical” or a “hierarchical one with the novel on top and the short story dependent” (96). Pratt further explains that the dependency is twofold: it has historical and conceptual aspects. For a long historic period, the novel was seen as the more established and prestigious of the two genres. Assuming that short and long literary forms have not developed simultaneously, critics argue that the short story needs to be explained by facts about the novel in order to obtain legitimacy. With a superficial view of the question, it appears that the novel has provided the ground for the development of the short story and for its reception among other literary established genres. On this view, the hierarchical relations between the two paired genres can be explained by the binary oppositions of “unmarked to marked, of major to minor, of greater to lesser, even ‘mature’ to ‘infant’” (Pratt 96). Furthermore, framing the problem of the definition in such terms may deny the possibility of creating formal and generic characteristics for the genre of short fiction. It seems that structural shortness—the main feature requiring stylistic devices like economy, concentration, and unity—is too arbitrary a quality to construct an autonomous genre. In

the last instance, critics who support this view claim that a new genre based on the formal principle of *shortness* is bound to fail:

So the tendency is to give up the business of formal genre definition for short fiction as hopeless or fruitless, and to deal with individual texts as parts of the author's whole *oeuvre*, within a general perspective on fiction dominated by the novel. Fiction is thus thought of as 'the novel' plus assorted hangers-on of lesser proportions: the colon in Novel: A FORUM ON FICTION implies as much. (Good 1994:147)

By opposition, another category of critics has tried to prove that short fiction can stand alone as a legitimate genre, i.e. *not* dependant on the novel. Their position and conceptualization are grounded on two major arguments: the short story's specific structural properties and its historical traditions. In line with Northrop Frye's comments in his essays on prose fiction *Anatomy of Criticism* (2000 [1957]), it seems that literary critics experience "great embarrassment" while discovering other fictional prose forms developed prior to the birth of the novel: "The literary historian who identifies fiction with the novel is greatly embarrassed by the length of time that the world managed to get along without the novel [...]" (303).

In his study on the nature of knowledge in short fiction, critic Ch. E. May (1994) is suggesting that the short story has, in fact, a longer tradition than the long story. He goes on to say that, initially, the short form was the most natural way of communication through which we used to express our inner original religious feelings. The primeval relation between humans and the sacred would seldom take the form of isolated short narratives that were later linked together in more coherent and longer narrative forms. There are, therefore, two early distinct narrative forms: one would be the short narrative (with "the limit of a single sitting", as suggested by Poe (1994 [1986]), that was to become the source of the fairy tale, of the folk ballad, and of the modern short story; the second longer form requires more sessions for its delivery. From this early narrative form emerged the saga, the epic, and the novel. At the conclusion of his study, Ch. May argues that the family resemblance between short stories, fairy tales, myths, or fables (seemingly emerging from the primeval religious nature of narrative) has generated particular properties for the ontology and epistemology of short fiction. By referring explicitly to these properties, May provides a more rigorous integration of previous insular findings that can help deepen our knowledge of basic differences between the reality and the experience embodied in the two emergent narrative forms: one short and one long.

Different theoretical approaches and frameworks in short story criticism have been adopted, and it is evident that the differences between these approaches lie mainly in how they account for the nature of the short story. One of the best-known features for short fiction is the emphasis on closure: short story writers focus on the final part of the story with the view of stirring surprise and raising unexpected questions. In identifying the role of the closure, critics make the assumption that the whole weight of the text is concentrated here. On this view, the closure effect may explain the entire concept of 'storyness' in short fiction (see Lohafer 1994).

Many other theoreticians define literary short fiction by discussing the modifier 'short'. Very briefly, this means that short stories are works of fiction of 'short' length. But how short should they be? We have an increasing number of anthologies that publish stories of no more than one page or just several paragraphs but, at the other end of the spectrum, there are stories of seventy or eighty pages. With no definitive limits for size or length, it may appear to be rather problematic to give a clear definition to the short story. But yet, 'shortness' *does* seem to be an inescapable feature that many short story critics use as a point of comparison with the seemingly more established literary form—the novel.

### 3. On Further Defining Short Fiction

For reasons that I will be addressing in what follows, I argue that the mere fact of physical shortness should not be treated as only an intrinsic feature but a property that necessarily occurs relative to something else. A short story, by reason of its length and its fragmented experience contained in the brief time dedicated to its reading, can express the inherent discontinuity and fragmentariness of the stories we generally share outside the fictional realm. In truth, the limited physical length of the short story excites the reader's imagination, as in real life we are used to coming to terms with the incompleteness of experience and with its transitory nature. Put differently, we thus learn how to manage fragmentariness. (Short) stories are fundamentally incomplete and indeterminate in both fiction and real life—they tell fragments of life, and at every turn, the intentional gaps in the story challenge us to discover a potentially new story. Fictional short stories 'imitate' our natural narrative habits in the sense that they mimic our desire of telling stories that are fragmented and that capture one "discrete moment of truth [...] – not *the* moment of truth", as Nadine Gordimer (1994: 265) rightfully acknowledges. According to the critic, the art of short fiction heightenedly manifests in the brief illumination of a particular situation:

Short-story writers see by the light of the flash; theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of—the present moment. Ideally, they have learnt to do without explanation of what went before, and what happens beyond this point. (1994:264)

On the other hand, 'shortness' may seem too quantitative and material a feature to give an accurate evaluation of 'short storyness', but yet it does seem *one* crucial fact. Generally, traditional critical studies on short fiction have treated the opposition between 'short fiction' and other 'longer narrative forms' with the aim of establishing the superiority of longer narrative modes. And by so doing, the short story has been seldom regarded as simply a poorer and more condensed form of the novel. In contrast to the complexity and forced continuity of the novel, the short story has been regularly defined as a minor art form. While I do admit that the relation between the two artistic forms needs to be recognized (for a better understanding of how they both communicate human experience), I argue that the examination of the differences between long and short fictions should not consolidate new structural relations between individual literary genres. Rather, we should acknowledge the emergence of a new literary form (short fiction), along with an ontologically different mode of knowing reality and of thinking.

This study argues that the short story's use of vigorous compression and fragmentation replenishes, rather than exhausts, nascent sources of textual meaning. The notion of structural distinction is crucial and ought to be considered as a means of capturing the nature of 'big and small forms', which reflects an individual *mode of knowing*: the short story takes its inspiration from the abstract realm of "dreams, desires, anxieties, and fears", "the timeless theme", or from "the immaterial reality" (May 1994:xxvi). In contrast, the novel appears to be more indebted to a social context, which means that novelists try to give an accurate reconstruction of the social world and recreate "the illusion of reality":

The results of this distinction are that whereas the novel is primarily a social and public form, the short story is mythic and spiritual. While the novel is primarily structured on a conceptual and philosophic framework, the short story is intuitive and lyrical. The novel exists to reaffirm the world of 'everyday' reality; the short story exists to 'defamiliarize' the everyday. (May 1994:133)

A short story is a photograph. South American writer Julio Cortázar insists that, like a successful photograph, the short story cuts off a fragment of reality to meet the physical limitations, but paradoxically, the selected segment acts “like an explosion which fully opens a much more ample reality, like a dynamic vision which spiritually transcends the space reached by the camera” (1994:246). This arresting metaphoric comparison is pertinent since it helps us realize that the discussion of the short story must begin with the notion of physical limits. It is important to notice that both photographers and short story writers use that limitation aesthetically. By delimiting the image or the event, they must choose something *meaningful* that projects imagination toward a realm beyond the visual or literary anecdote in the photograph or in the story (Cortázar 1994:247). Short stories have the mysterious quality to ‘illuminate beyond themselves’. It appears then that his essential quality of structural brevity has not only served experimental writers but it relates to the idea of tension and intensity in the story.

In opposition to the novel’s tendency to render the full-length of life, the short story communicates a significant fragment of life; nonetheless, within the restraints of limited space, the fragment is lifted to the status of an intense awareness of our own deepest experiences. The story’s tendency toward fragmentation and textual density was at the core of modernist fiction when short fiction began to flourish. Perhaps more than modernist novelists, writers of short story greatly explored the relation between the fragment and the whole, which led them to experience an inherent paradox in their writing: the fragment as a part detached from the whole completed the whole but finally remained the most memorable and autonomous segment of the text. Perhaps not surprisingly, the story’s fragmented nature and disjointed discourse suited modern time and its disordered subjectivity in a world that slowly but surely became more disarticulated against a background of sprawling quantities of tittered fragments.

The short story is a fragmented and restless form, a matter of hit and miss, and it is perhaps for this reason that it suits modern consciousness—which seems best expressed as flashes of fearful insight alternating with near-hypnotic states of indifference. (Gordimer 1994:265)

Stylistically, short stories focus on one single moment or a single situation that can best capture “the ultimate reality” (Gordimer 1994:264); that is, the subtle meanings of our human experience and the infinite reflections of human life. Conversely, novel writers use the fictional novel as an artistic means of “netting ultimate reality” (Gordimer 1994:263), but their artistic tools have often failed to attain such an ambitious goal. This may explain the novel’s frequent changes in structural form and narrative approaches. Regardless of the artistic form and methods employed by novel writers, novels seem to be losing themselves in a bewilderingly complex search for meanings, completeness or totality. It can be said that novel writers genuinely seek to give a *complete* sense of resolution. Admittedly, they try to render the full-length of life in order to give an authentic account of a complete life. This sustained attempt of the novel can nonetheless prove rather deceptive. Novels misleadingly teach us that we can live out the ‘totality’ of experience. For that matter, it is empirically impossible for the experiencing subject to experience completeness, totality, or plenitude. Logical completeness is arguably an attribute of real objects and actions in real life.

#### **4. ‘Short’ and ‘Long’ Narrative Forms—Contrasting Features**

Essentially, the structural differences between short and long forms ought not to be regarded as mere contrasting equivalents but as two models that allow different engagement in

two distinct artistic forms. These individual literary fictional narratives propose fundamentally different ways of distinct modes of thinking and imagination. It is just reasonable to argue that short fiction, by its very length, will present individual characteristics for 'short' experiences or snapshots of reality. The way we reflect on such fragments of experience will clearly differ from the mode of thinking used for understanding longer narratives. Short and long narrative fictions ultimately suggest two particular ways of confronting reality and of coming to terms with experience.

It is only reasonable for the short form to rely on implication, suggestion, and in-depth understanding. The tension created by economy and fragmentation, ellipsis, the impulse toward depersonalisation, the fragile dialogues, the single effect, and the suspension of motion in linear narrative are characteristically inherent devices sustained by short texts. In an attempt to capture the story's meaning, myriads of minds turn the text over and around, speculate, play out interpretations and construct others anew.

E.A. Poe (1994 [1986]) was the first to acknowledge the issue of shortness, as linked to the concepts of "unity" and of "singleness of effect". For Poe, the brevity of the short story creates a sense of intensity and compression. Due to its unified and compact form, the short story requires a special type of reading and understanding, one that goes in the depth of implication. This means that the mode of thinking used by both readers and interpreters of short fiction is inherently particular, i.e. their ability to recognize the deep level of understanding at which meanings begin to develop.

As already argued, short stories' structural brevity generates changes in artistic techniques and devices, which, in turn, can cause dramatic shifts in reading and in the corresponding cognitive operations used by readers for understanding and interpretation. Thus, for instance, in the analysis of (modernist) short stories, one needs to look at two major shifts—the shift in technique and in the reader's ability to understand "the theme" (the meaning) of the story. In her study on the modern short story (late 19<sup>th</sup> c. and early 20<sup>th</sup> c. short stories), Suzanne C. Ferguson (1994) argues that the brevity of short fiction requires the use of two distinct techniques: stylistic economy and the foregrounding of style. Ultimately, short story writers have to overcome the limits and restraints imposed by the story's limited length, which also results in the use of special stylistic devices.

By generally limiting the point of view to one character, short fiction writers focus their subject matter on the exploration of unique experiences or short fragments of life. In his study on short fiction, *The Lonely Voice*, Frank O'Connor argues that short stories do not normally create "heroes" or models that can be followed, but instead, the world of short fiction is populated by isolated figures, "wandering about the fringes of society" (O'Connor 1963:19), dreamers, artists, or lonely idealists. In one word, this fictional world is the one of "the submerged population" that has certainly changed from writer to writer, but that will always give a sense of "an intense awareness of human loneliness" (O'Connor 1963:19). Clearly, "the lonely voice" of the submerged population prompts the articulation of a particular attitude of mind used to understand reality.

Unlike the novel's investigation of the totality of human experience and of the full-length of life, short fiction allows an in-depth analysis of intensely subjective and isolated human experience. The preoccupation of short story writers with such unsettling themes, along with the employment of a limited point of view, can pose an additional problem for the reader. It seems that the reader's quest for the meaning(s) becomes even more problematic, due to the uncertainty generated by the narrative point of view. This limited access to the condensed textual universe makes the reader's journey to reach the meaning a long and challenging one. Further, Suzanne C.

Ferguson argues that the main technical shift in short fiction appears to be the transformation of the traditional plot by “deletion” and “substitution” (1994:221-222), resulting in the creation of “elliptical plots” (1994:222) and “metaphorical plots” (1994:223). In essence, short story readers are asked to build ‘hypothetical plots’, which are mental constructs that are not intended to only recuperate the narrative sequence, but to evaluate other possible developments of the condensed or suppressed plot. In S. Ferguson’s own parlance:

By hypothetical plots I mean something more specifically formulable than the bare-bones structuralist ‘fabula’: a counter-story, with a beginning, middle, and end, that tells ‘what happened’ in chronological order. [...] The reader must to some extent construct this hypothetical plot in order for the actual story to seem meaningful. (Ferguson 1994:222)

## 5. Reading Short Fiction and the Workings of Counterfactual Thinking

The short story’s hypothetical plots can generate a higher number of possible courses of narrative developments than in longer fiction. This means that the reader will constantly ask questions about the multitude of possibilities that arise from deletions and substitutions. In other words, the reader is required to stay alert for potential narrative developments, regarding, for instance, what could be happening in the present of the story, what might have happened in the past, what may yet happen (based on present evaluations), or what may never actually happen. On this view, readers are asked to draw inferences about existents or actions that have only been implicitly included in the text, and in the end, they should draw mental representations of these implicit items. Apart from what ‘happens’ in the world of the text, readers may need to make sense of other dynamic alternative worlds that are dreamed of, imagined, wished for, or secretly planned by characters. Short ‘storyness’ thus resides in the reader’s ability to recognize this large alternative system of the text and later bring it to life.

This has also much to say regarding the configuration of the story—on the one hand, there is the actual world generated by the text, and on the other hand, this world is surrounded by a multitude of alternative possible worlds. That said, I may safely argue that while reading short fiction, the reader’s mind operates as a world-making machine: “we recognize a story that has not been fully told lying behind the one that *is* told. Reading the stories, we become detectives, piecing together the main elements of the hypothetical plots in order to rationalize the actual plot” (Ferguson 1994:223).

Then I am suggesting that the particular mode of thinking in short fiction is a major factor in differentiating it from other kinds of narrative or literary genres. Principally, this may explain why short stories necessitate particular approaches in both writing and reading. Such a particular mode of thinking requires readers and interpreters to accommodate to a new profile equipped with special reading abilities: the construction of the hypothetical plot or double plot (the story that has not been (fully) told yet), the ability to reach the deep level basis of the text where meanings are developed, and the capacity to restore the sum of possible worlds that form the semantic domain of the text. Short story readers show a special conceptual ability to create mental alternatives and to blend these hypothetical mental spaces with other mental scenarios prompted by their ‘actual world’. In short, interpreters have the extraordinary capacity to operate mentally on the unreal, to run simultaneous mental scenarios, and to perform off-line cognitive simulations. Understanding the narrative universe in short fiction requires readers to carry out intensive cognitive work. In order to build mental constructs of ‘true’ possible worlds, readers need to compare non-actual facts with the facts existing in the textual actual world, and then they need to combine these elements in a new blended mental space.

It seems that most mental work performed during reading short fiction uses the tools of counterfactual thinking, which involves dynamic substitutions, creative mental constructions of non-actual worlds, and structural combinations of fragmented textual universes. Short story readers perform such mental operations because, in this way, they can have access to the meanings of the text. Therefore, a close analysis of the bends and turns of the interpreter's imagination when performing acts of reading short fiction can prove useful for an insightful exploration of the intricate paths of human imagination.

## References

- Cortázar, Julio. 1994. "Some Aspects of the Short Story" in *The New Short Story Theories*. Charles E. May (Ed.). Aden W. Hayes (Trans.). Ohio: Ohio University Press, pp. 245-256.
- Ferguson, C. Suzanne. 1994. "Defining the Short Story. Impressionism and Form" in *The New Short Stories Theories*. Charles E. May (Ed.). Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, pp. 218-230.
- Frye, Northrop. 2000 [1957]. *Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Good, Graham. 1994. "Notes on the Novella" in *The New Short Stories Theories*. Charles E. May (Ed.). Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, pp. 147-164.
- Gordimer, Nadine. 1994. "The Flash of Fireflies" in *The New Short Stories Theories*. Charles E. May (Ed.). Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, pp. 263-267.
- Lohafer, Susan. 1994. "A Cognitive Approach to Storyness" in *The New Short Stories Theories*. Charles E. May (Ed.). Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, pp. 301-311.
- March-Russell, Paul. 2009. *The Short Story: An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- May, Charles E. 1994. "The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction" in *The New Short Stories Theories*. Charles E. May (Ed.). Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, pp. 131-143.
- Matthews, Brander. 1994 [1901]. "The Philosophy of the Short-Story" in *The New Short Stories Theories*. Charles E. May (Ed.). Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, pp. 73-80.
- O'Connor, Frank. 1963. *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story*. Cleveland, OH: World Publishing Company.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. 1994 [1846]. "The Philosophy of Composition" in *The New Short Stories Theories*. Charles E. May (Ed.). Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, pp. 59-72.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. 1994. "The Short Story. The Long and the Short of It" in *The New Short Stories Theories*. Charles E. May (Ed.). Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, pp. 91-113.

## Notes on the author

**Gabriela Tucan** is a junior lecturer at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, West University of Timișoara. She has seven years of experience in higher education where she is specialized in teaching the English language for CAE and CPE, academic writing, and creative writing. Gabriela Tucan currently holds a PhD title in cognitive poetics, specifically in the cognitive operations necessary for reading and comprehension E. Hemingway's short fiction. She has two master's degrees in Creative Writing and Adult Education, both awarded by West University of Timișoara. Her broader research interests cover cognitive narratology, the properties of conceptual blending, and cultural cognitive theories. Previously published articles include: "A Cat in the Rain in the Reader's Mind", "The Impact of Narrative on Human Thinking and Personal Development", "The Reader's Mind Beyond the Text – The Science of Cognitive Narratology", "Cognitive Poetics: Blending Narrative Mental Spaces. Self-Construal and Identity in Short Literary Fiction". She is a member of SRSAA, ESSE, RAAS, and The Hemingway Society.