A Historical Overview of Short Fiction: A Story of Subversion

WHAT ARE STORIES?

Over the 170-year time frame of short fiction, assumptions about fiction changed. Not only have the conventions of plot, character, and setting changed, but so has the nature of the author and the reader. But throughout its flexible and evolving history, the short story has remained a subversive form—so subversive that extensive scholarship continues to seek a suitable definition. Each generation finds in a story a "moment" of renewal, a "version of reality" that, be it allegory, epiphany, or graphic fiction, questions traditional values and meanings, and explores new possibilities of interpreting the world.

Rooted in antiquity, storytelling is as ancient as oral culture itself. Short stories are older than novels, having arisen as myths, legends, and tales, while novels arose with European written culture in the 16th- and 17th- centuries. Both novels and short stories contain elements of protest, social conscience, communal identity, and individual freedom. But most novels deal with society; stories deal with individuals. A novel reveals the times of a place and people, but a story is a stopped moment, a speed bump in the flow of time.

Stories have certain characteristics: a literary story is concentrated, intense, subtle, and suggestive. Unlike the passing events of mundane reality, stories are the art of depicting and shaping conflict or "crisis." This crisis, sometimes known as a "complication," may or not be resolved; dramatic structures are as varied as the perceptions of authors. What makes scholarly definitions difficult is the lack of clear divisions or categories: stories may be realistic or non-realistic—with a continuum that glides between them. In the realistic story, authors' techniques are invisible, language is descriptive, and characters have a psychology and motivation; the events of the story move from cause to effect. By contrast, the "non-realistic" story calls attention to its devices and mixes in the improbable and unlikely.

The question of what a story is can depend on the age in which it is written. Some generations need magic and marvelous events; others need small narratives of family and relationships. Still others require national allegories and political awareness. One writer seeks to see the world through the consciousness of a character, while another challenges not only the conventions of narrative but even the act of reading.

Furthermore, stories often don't start at the "beginning" nor do they always "end" with a satisfying or definitive conclusion. How long, or short, is a short story? Against a backdrop of transformations, the story evolves and eludes, a subversive form that trivializes the large events of history, claims importance for the insignificant, and cares about lonely characters.

Through its long history, the short story has been a subversive form, a literary container for fears, anxieties, dreams, strange feelings, perceptions. Something uncertain—resistant to articulation—lies beyond solid reality. Perhaps reality is an illusion, and there is more to the world than the senses can comprehend. This possibility, in fact, is one of the dividing lines between fiction and non-fiction.

Writers and other artists have always responded to their times. Short fiction evolved at precise historical moments of transition, and short fiction writers have recorded, celebrated, or foretold these moments. These "shock points" include the weakening of religion by science, the rise of American nationalism, the decline of the aristocracy in 19th- century Europe, the trauma and aftermath of World War I, the technology revolution, post colonialism, multiculturalism, and new nationalism.

The Short Story Pre-1914

The short story is rooted in centuries of human experience. Threads of its origins are woven through even the most modern story. During the 18th-century Age of Enlightenment, the Bible diminished in influence. Reason, logic, scientific and mathematical thinking prevailed, but folk and fairy tales—heavy on plot and morality—carried wild memories of demons, nightmares, revenge, and the supernatural. As science continued its assault against religious faith through the 18th and into the 19th century, tales (and, for a while, the short-lived Gothic novel) served as receptacles for a wide variety of imaginative, unconscious, and mysterious impulses.

As a revolutionary form, stories can claim revolutions as part of their heritage. The American Revolution in 1776 led to the flowering of American secular literature, free of British and European influence and religious purpose. The quest for a national identity inevitably followed independence, and writers like Washington Irving (1783-1859) and, later, Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-64) sought to express this identity through literary forms, including the short story. Irving, who preceded Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49) as a writer of tales, based much of his fiction on American material or transformed European legends and folk tales using an American setting and characters, as he did in “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.”

As America developed its own literature in the early decades of the 19th century, Poe defined the rules and values of the short story, especially its characteristic “unity of effect.” His techniques influenced future generations of science fiction, detective fiction, and horror writers—not to mention twentieth-century short story writers and critics. To the single effect, Poe added the requirement (a blend of traditions and his own obsessions) that a good story is unusual, original, and strange. Inner sensations and emotional reactions were more potent than descriptions. With the puppet-collecting professor Branden Matthews championing Poe’s formal principles forty years later, the first conceptual steps in a tradition were established.

In Europe, The French Revolution (1789-99) meant the end of aristocratic privilege, creating a space for the common person at the centre of the story. The l905 and l917 Russian revolutions ended Czarist Russia, and Russian writers, even Count Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) whose omniscience extended to the thoughts of dogs and horses, eventually changed his characters from aristocrats to peasants and working citizens. With an emphasis on mimesis (life-like imitation) and a forward-moving plot, the fantastic became submerged. Realism in fiction arrived with the Industrial Revolution and continued unabated with the discoveries of evolutionary biologist Charles Darwin at mid-century. Ordinary humans in their everyday interactions, it was believed, could be studied by the naturalistic writer, just as the scientist analyzed phenomena in the laboratory.

As influential as Poe, in Russia Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) reshaped the structure of the story. Chekhov wrote a thousand stories, vignettes, and sketches. He learned brevity from French writer Guy de Maupassant, along with plotless stories and poetic lyricism. He used themes, counter themes, and strong images; his symbols contributed to meanings. Chekhov’s stories have a tone of disillusionment or disappointment. His characters display frustration, lack of communication, and obsession. Understatement became a device to reflect their disappointments or failures. Chekhov's innovative plots, which often eliminated beginnings and endings, were technical developments that led to James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver, and writers of the late 20th century. Freed from the formal restrictions of a traditional plot, writers could concentrate on metaphors, inter-relationships, or the internal consciousness of characters.

The increasing interest in the short story was a worldwide phenomenon. Writers from the U.S., Canada, France, Ireland, and Russia were among its pioneers. In Canada, the first fictions by “new world” pioneers began to appear. During the fifty years between the American Civil War (1861-64) and World War I in 1914, the hard-edged language of science, and then warfare,

led away from the romantic impulses of Poe. War fiction developed its own unique style of confusion, trauma, and uncertainty—with new words for the unspeakable. Freed American slaves expressed their stories in generative prose of identity, freedom, and regional voices. Coming-of-age-initiation and disillusionment characterized many late19th- and early 20th-century American stories.

In Italy, Switzerland, and Paris, the Irish modernist James Joyce fashioned the details of ordinary life into a new kind of realism. Critic Hugh Kenner calls Joyce's achievement "double writing" with every word a shimmering haze of other words, places, myths, and meanings. Before Joyce, a writer's subject determined the style. For Joyce, his subject *was* "style." After *Dubliners* (his short story collection published in 1914), the commonplace became unique. In short fiction, epiphanic revelations and unity of development moved the story away from "mimetic realism" as modernists rebelled against the conventions of Edwardian and Victorian fiction. Controlled narrative language, apparently simple, free of rhetoric and sentiment, was rich with subtext, patterns, and images. This experiment in realism changed the tone and manner of telling fiction. Titles, beginnings, and endings became crucial to an understanding of an author's intention. Subtle details and fragments directed readers to meanings.

The Short Story Post-1914

With World War I—its poison gas, bombers, tanks, rolling artillery barrage, and inexpensive machine guns—comes a brooding sense of mechanized society, fragments, questions of identity, isolation from society and nature. Literary impressionism considers how meaning is derived from metaphors or precise descriptions of passing sensations. By 1918, though, even the nature of language changed, taking on ironic undertones: the phrase "all quiet on the western front" (and later "smart bombs" or "friendly fire") meant the opposite.

A new creative principle, the artistic fragment, became the hallmark of the modernist short story. With history in ruins, recollection was often expressed as fragments of thought. Literary heroes, once capable of action, became passive victims of circumstances. Ernest Hemingway, a shell-shocked war veteran, would learn from war correspondent Stephen Crane that uncertainty was truer than assurance. As war-speak and propaganda pulled meaning from language, he revealed meaninglessness in clichés of courage, honour, and glory.

Of course, fiction is also a commodity, and this was particularly true in the two decades following World War I. Mass-circulation magazines promoted consumer products and changed reading habits, and if readers couldn't find the time to read a three-volume Victorian novel, the audience could still be profitably divided according to kinds of genres and types of paper (pulp, slick, or literary). The success of these mass-market magazines created a fissure between so-called popular and literary fiction. The fallacy suggests if it's successful in the marketplace, it can't be worthy of academic study. "High modernism" was a term that distinguished the self-consciousness and high ideals of the literary works of this period.

After the war, Poe's sense of shifting perspectives continued with Franz Kafka (1883-1924) whose inner depictions of the loss of self epitomized feelings of alienation and, often, paranoia. With the displacement of the self, some writers, like Morley Callaghan, looked outward and confronted the failure of religious, moral, and social structures. Later, French existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus looked inward at the bared human soul and its quest for authenticity. Though the story in North America and England briefly retreated to a conservative realism after World War II, modernist experiments continued as a literary underground in the small presses and literary magazines. Latin Americans of Borges's and Cortázar's generation were experimenting with forms, techniques, and avant-garde principles as early as the l940s and came in contact with the French avant-garde in the l950s.

As the world changed, so again did fiction. As always, writers reacted to the events that shaped their lives. Technology transformed the last four decades of the 20th century, just as the first questioning of mechanized and urban society suggested the postmodernist decades in the future. From then on, literature was defined by the technology that shaped each era, be it engines and motors, or nuclear energy and electronics. The effects of technology now gave rise to the "new" modernism, to uncertainty, to global immigration, and the end of cultural isolation. The technology of World War II gave way to the strange combination of nuclear physics and cheap assault rifles, and a method of army supply lines that became the template for the 2000s' Big Box corporate culture. As the large superpowers divested themselves of their colonies, the quest for a national literature could be found in short forms—Canadian fiction, Australian fiction, Filipino or Mexican fiction. In Canada, Australia, and other post-Empire "new nations," questions of identity arose. Women's rights, anticipated by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Edith Wharton, appeared in Canadian fiction as early as the 1920s. Within realism were different ways to understand representation. Beyond aesthetics, short fiction proffered cautions—against the limitations of certain ways of thinking, living an inauthentic life, and compromising basic beliefs.

The sixty-year period from the post-war Baby Boom to the 2000s X-generation opened up diverse possibilities for short fiction writers. Against a backdrop of sweeping social and technological change, long-held views crumbled. In the sixties came the youth movements, civil rights, anti-war sentiment, and an unprecedented view of "the blue planet" from the vantage point of the moon. A new generation of readers avidly read the fiction of "hip" anti-establishment writers like American Kurt Vonnegut, a major influence on Japanese writer Haruki Murakami. With Vonnegut, science fiction and fantasy became mainstream, bridging the gulf between popular and "literary" fiction. Other U.S. writers, like John Barth and Donald Barthelme, found renewal in parodying traditional styles and techniques. In Canada, Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, and Margaret Atwood began long careers as novelists and short story writers that would gain them international stature. When the Soviet Union collapsed in the l980s, new nation states emerged, and with them, writers expressing long-suppressed views. Insightful scholarly methodologies expanded the boundaries of short fiction, and personal essays on writing by authors led to deeper understanding of their works. The popularity of Creative Writing courses generated innovative collections, how-to handbooks, and new interest in short stories.

The importance of translation opened the North American audience to different literary perspectives. The major world languages were no longer English or French. Italo Calvino, Heinrich Böll, and Julio Cortázar, among others, suggested in their "anti-realistic" works that not everything can be explained, not everything is scientific, be it atom smashing or genetic engineering—that personal visions matter. A story is a snapshot, not a movie. Short stories, then, become the means of a personal quest to know the world. In such a world, "reality" is an exception to the laws of short fiction.

As a subversive form, the story is oddly double: the world depicted and the meaning revealed, suggested, hinted. In the postcolonial phase of short fiction, the centre and the periphery switched places. The first stirrings of fiction beyond empire appear in a "nationalist phase" once cleverly described (borrowing a title from *Star Wars*) as "the empire writes back." Various multiculturalism policies in Canada and former imperial colonies led to a new form of cohesion called multicultural publishing. A new internationalism emerged from a combination of small local publishing houses and literary magazines as well as a new interest in translations. The essential qualities of short fiction were also re-evaluated. Jorge Luis Borges said that short inquiries or "investigations" were the purpose of stories. Italo Calvino suggested a new poetic of the story: replace classic ideas with lightness, quickness, exactness, consistency, and invisibility.

Once again, the tradition of short fiction was reshaped. Marginality, always an aspect of

short fiction (Frank O'Connor made it the premise for his 1962 study of the short story), found perfect expression in national allegories. In the new geo-politics of short fiction, non-Western nations shaped world affairs. On a social level, personal expressions long suppressed produced potent stories—those of indigenous groups known as the Fourth World, graphic artists, and lesbian, gay, bi, or trans-gendered writers. In a complex world, the always subversive short story confronted its opposite, excess: too much history, government, corporations, commercialism, dishonest philosophies, and inauthentic lives.

By the 2000s, consumer technologies replaced producer technologies with cell phones, games, and giant screen HDTV that provided access to unusual places and peoples. In the global communication world, how do we imagine our sense of self? In a wired world, the threat of the "matrix" is real. Fiction merged with media studies as the expressive qualities of image and text or comics evolved into movies, hypertext, and game theory, all promising areas of research into cultural hybrids and cultural trends. Not only did this develop new audiences, but also a new awareness of the relationship between writer and reader.

Writers like Pauline Johnson and J.G. Sime were reclaimed from the past, and new perspectives on established authors, such as Sinclair Ross, Angela Carter, and Ernest Hemingway, suggested new insights into the creation of the self. Even the nature of the writer was redefined, in some cases as a strong solo voice, and in others as a communal storyteller articulating for those who cannot. In a full circle of the persistence of short forms came the revival of fabulists and magical tales, breakaway styles often retold in a postcolonial or anti-capitalist stance or as some other form of debate. If there is a crisis of meaning, it will be expressed in short stories.

Rooted in humanity, the multiple heritages of the elusive and subversive short story defy definition. Despite a century of approaches and scholarly and authorial debate, despite science, psychology, and electronic networks, the short story remains a persistent mystery. Reason cannot always bridge fiction's intuitive gap between what is said and what is meant. But though writers could not capture reality, they could explore the poetics of consciousness, imagination, and process. With no consensus on generic traits, a fiction of openness has unlimited possibilities.

Yet no matter how innovative in ideas, trends, styles, or subjects, stories are how we communicate, how we share who we are. The hidden wisdom within every story is the result of the details noticed, and somehow, by paying attention to the seemingly insignificant, an effect becomes a truth. In uniting individuals into one community, stories are true to their roots; in this way, short story writers embrace the mystery of the world.