

SHORT STORY THEORIES : A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY PERSPECTIVE

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Viorica Patea, the editor of *Short Story Theories - a Twenty-First Century Perspective*, is to be congratulated. Any book that brings together renowned academic specialists in the genre, such as Charles May, author of seminal works like *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice*, and editor of *Short Story Theories* and *New Short Story Theories*, or post-modern specialist, Farhat Iftekharuddin, with a range of talented scholars mostly working in Spain, is bound to be of interest to scholars specialising in narrative. Her introduction deftly sketches the history of the growing critical awareness of the short story as a genre. She shows how, after Poe's ground-breaking essays, later theorists have resorted to making a vast range of comparisons, such as, for example, photographs, riddles and enigmas, while noting recurrent features, such as transcendental moments, epiphanies, stories with no story line. However, in doing so, she is hardly breaking new theoretical ground.

The collection is structured into four parts: on the origins of the genre and Poe's foundational theorising, on linguistic theories, on Postcolonialism, Orality and Gender approaches, and on the Postmodern short story and other varieties of short fiction.

It begins with Antonio López Santos's essay, "The Paratactic Structure in *The Canterbury Tales*: Two Antecedents of the Modern Short Story", which takes a traditional approach to demonstrate convincingly how the integration of the Wife

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of Bath's Prologue with her tale (two texts at once real and mythical) can be seen to anticipate Bakhtinian 'dialogism'.

Any panoramic view of the Short Story must include some acknowledgement of the genre's first master and theorist, Edgar Allan Poe. Of the two articles on Poe, Peter Gibian's well-written case-study, "Anticipating Aestheticism", provides an expert account of how Poe's short story "The Oval Portrait" and Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birth-Mark" form part of a longer dialogic exchange between the two writers, as the latter works to position himself on the question of Aestheticism. The article then traces Poe's influence on French writers, particularly Baudelaire, analysing convincingly Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" and "The Purloined Letter" and their use of the 'reader-in-the-tale' figure as "an experimental process of interaction between subjectivities that begins with the investigating subject putting himself in the place of the subject to be studied"(65). Through the aestheticized anti-heroes of longer works such as Huysman's *A Rebours* and Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, the circle of influence is closed by Gibian's final section, which demonstrates how Poe's aesthetic is once again appreciated in the American *fin-de-siècle* promotion of both Aestheticism and Decadence.

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The debt owed to Poe as the short story's original theorist is the subject of Erik Van Achter's essay. Just as the short story has struggled to establish itself as a fully autonomous genre, located somewhere between the lyric poem and the novel, so theorists have struggled to go beyond Poe's original stipulations, one of which noted that the length of the story must be sufficient for it to be read in one sitting, in order to produce the desired effect on the reader. It is here that qualitative and quantitative theories intersect, as only story that is short (quantity) will produce a short story effect (quality) on a reader. Yet, Van Achter appears unprepared to concede ground on the question of distinguishing "between a story that is merely short and a work that may properly be called a 'short story'" (80) and it is a point he returns to again and again, as he clearly resists the idea that ultimately size matters. Elsewhere he writes, "The quantitative difference, we shall see, is little more than a consequence of accepting a qualitative criterion". A reversal of the terms 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' here produces an equally satisfactory affirmation. After all, a story that is short will tend to impose certain practices on author, reader and critic alike. I suspect that when you are a short story specialist, with a vested interest in the complexities of qualitative analysis, as a way of confirming your preferred genre's place at the high table of literary culture, a simple definition that lets in the *hoi polloi* does not suit.

While Per Winther (to whom the volume is dedicated) uses Discourse Analysis, to discern framing devices, Pilar Alonso's cognitive approach provides an interesting perspective on the size question, as her critical focus is on the 'episode', arguably

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a unit common to both short story and novel. From a cognitive perspective, she concludes: “novels and short stories are not in fact so distant from one another, especially when the dense network of underlying cognitive paths that connect their respective archetypal configurations is taken into account” (124). Her observation that they are “not so distant” seems slightly contradicted by novels and short stories having “their respective archetypal configurations” (124). Alonso appears to defend the thesis at the heart of this collection, that novels and short stories are fundamentally different, while her admirable analysis draws her to conclude the difference is less obvious.

Part three begins with Carolina Núñez-Puente’s Bakhtin-influenced study of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*, from what she describes as a hybrid critical perspective that is both feminist and dialogical. While the blandly named protagonists of the story, Jane and John, seem to indicate a story that would move along archetypal gender lines, Núñez-Puente’s reading is alert to how the ending of Gilman’s story opens up multiple gender and Postcolonial interpretations.

Rebeca Hernández discusses the relationship between the letter as literary form and the short story, by studying a short story in the form of a letter, Honwana’s 1971 “Rosita até morrer”, a letter-poem, “Carta de um contratado” (1961) by the Angolan writer, António Jacinto, and a letter within the novel, *Chiquinho* (1947) by Baltasar Lopes. Hernández shows very convincingly how the hybrid reality of postcolonial nations finds resonance in shorter narrative forms, and how the letter form in particular allows the text to capture the sound of that hybrid reality, through the voices of protagonists whose Portuguese includes local African dialect words, and sometimes grammatical irregularities. Her own translation of a twenty-line letter from *Chiquinho* is a notable improvement on the quoted Penguin original.

Teresa Gibert’s “Margaret Atwood’s Art of Brevity: Metaphorical Conceptualization and Short Story Writing” shows plenty of sensitivity to Atwood’s superb use of metaphor in her short stories. However, Atwood’s metaphors are in evidence across the range of her fiction, so the analytical skills displayed here could be equally applied to the novels, as the author virtually admits at the end of the article.

Maria Jesús Hernáez Lerena’s “Short-Storyness and Eyewitnessing” discusses a series of Canadian short stories to highlight how short stories that focus on a present moment, or a moment lived as if forever present, often take an event out of the causal temporal chain of events that characterises so much longer fiction, and become “literature as enigma, in contrast with the novel, which is committed to literature as survey”, as John Bayley puts it (183). Her well-argued writing demonstrates the clear affinity between the short story and testimony writing.

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Enigma is the key theme in Farhat Ifterkharuddin's excellent analysis of six short stories from Isabel Allende's *The Stories of Eva Luna*. The unifying theme of this criticism is "the sublime interconnectedness that the genre and the female gender share" (246), as they both share an enigmatic quality. Enigma as a central aesthetic characteristic of this form here finds its perfect complement in the enigmas that the female protagonists of these stories represent for the male characters.

Luisa María González Rodríguez's "Intertextuality and Collage in [Donald] Barthelme's Short Fiction", establishes the author's postmodernist credentials very clearly. But, by focusing on stories anthologised in 1981, the essay seems neither to advance short story theory *per se* nor account for new work by Barthelme. Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan's essay on Tobias Wolff's short stories provides a very competent account of the author's shorter fiction. However, after debating at length the relevance of Minimalism to his subject, the essayist appears to pass on to a discussion of Realism, without bringing the two concepts together in his conclusion.

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Lauro Zavala's article brings our awareness to a number of Central and South American authors working in a range of short fiction forms, minifictions and serial narratives, whose vibrant creativity suggests an emerging power in twenty-first century narrative culture.

Finally, Charles May's survey of the American twenty-first century short-story scene has all the hallmarks of a senior critic confident in his judgements after an academic lifetime dedicated to the study and theorisation of this genre. His criticism of Richard Ford's short fiction helps us understand why collections like *Women with Men* and *A Multitude of Sins* never came near to being a recognised masterpiece like his novel, *Independence Day*. Here, May does not choose to theorise further, but rather give us his clear-eyed take on the state of the art in the USA, recommending established and up-and-coming writers.

If I have any general criticism of the book, it is to question the limits of its coverage; it is strongly USA-centred, and while it introduces us to writers writing in Spanish (arguably taking us beyond the range of English Studies), it does not cover work from India, Australia or New Zealand, all countries with vibrant traditions in the genre. However, as it stands, this is an impressive collection of essays, three or four of which are of the first order. It is a recommendable addition to any short-story specialists' library.

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Works cited

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