

# The Short Story as a Genre of Ontological Uncertainty

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**Abstract** The article takes a critical stance towards the Anglo-American use of the term short story as a collective term for the entire domain of short prose. Partially based on German literary criticism, which makes a clear distinction between the novella and the short story, it attempts to demonstrate that within the realm covered by the American term of short story. There are at least two, perhaps even three, genres with differing formal structures, organization of narrative, ideological basis, and pragmatic motivation.

**Key words** short story; novella; genre theory

What then is time? If no one asks me,  
I know; if I wish to explain it to one  
that asketh, I know not.  
Saint Augustine

Let us start with an allusion to the famous Raymond Carver short story: What we talk about when we talk about a short story? The answer to this question could be similar to that of St Augustine referring to time: although we all read short stories and know what they are, any attempt at theoretical determination and conceptual definition leaves us confused. This confusion is not only due to the existence of different theories of genre, similar to different concepts of the novel. When we talk about the novel, it is nevertheless clear that we are referring to the genre called by the term *novela* in Spanish, *romanzo* in Italian, *Roman* in German, *roman* in French, Slovene, Croatian, Serbian and Russian. However, it is not so clear and transparent when we refer to the short story. What is called a short story in Anglo-American theoretical writings becomes *novela corta*, *cuento* or *cuento corto* in Spanish tradition, *nouvelle* or *conte* in French, *racconto* in Italian, *Novelle* or *Kurzgeschichte* in German, *kratka priča* or *novela* in Serbian and Croatian, *kratka zgodba* or *novela* in Slovene, and *rasskaz*, *povest* or *novella* in Russian literary theory. While in Spanish, French and Russian traditions the above mentioned terms are almost synonymous, this is not so in German, Serb, Croat and Slovene criticism where what the American tradition defines as a short story falls into two separate genres: the *novella* and a genre which in the latter

literary cultures appears as a literal translation of the American term short story and which shall be called here, for the sake of clarity, *the short story proper* (in German *Kurzgeschichte*, in Serbian and Croatian *kratka priča*, in Slovene *kratka zgodba*). The question that inevitably arises is the following: does this form of short fiction, described by the terms mentioned above, cover a single genre with numerous types and variants or does it refer to (at least) two different genres, each of them with a different structure, pragmatic orientation and narrative purpose?

This review of terminological differences should further be complemented by adding that Anglo-American literary criticism also knows the term novella; the term is, however, usually understood as referring to a predecessor of the short story, and is therefore also considered as being subordinate to the more contemporary term. Some rare exceptions set aside, the term is characteristically described as in Cuddon's *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, where the novella is defined as a kind of short story.

Taking into account the complexity and large number of contemporary theories of the short story, this position becomes understandable. Moreover, the plethora of definitions of the term short story resulted in the fact that also this genre was defined following Bakhtin's definition of the novel as a Proteic genre. The argument that what some of the European literary studies distinguish as two distinct genres, i. e. the novella and the short story proper, is in fact just two manifestations of the numerous possible types of the genre short story, is tenable. It reflects the fact that the complex heterogeneity of the forms of short stories can be described at least in part with the system of different typologies that distinguish between e. g. epiphany- and anecdotic or plot-stories, between realistic and fantasy stories, between metaphorical and elliptical ones, between descriptive and impressionistic ones etc., and last but not least also between shorter and longer short stories. Despite this legitimate claim, I will attempt to defend the opposite argument and with the help of historical and phenomenological argumentation suggest that the novella and short story proper are two distinct genres with different genre typicality.

German literary studies (Neuschäffer, Auerbach, Jolles etc.) in particular showed that the novella first appeared in the Renaissance period where it developed from the *Milesian Tales* and from various other forms of Medieval short fiction (e. g. exemplum, casus, fabliau, 'novella' of the Italian *Il Novellino* etc). With Boccaccio and his followers (Bandello, Marguerite de Navarre, Cervantes) the novella became an esthetically perfected literary form and also a subject of theoretical discourse. The period after the Renaissance saw a temporary decline of this genre; its popularity was again restored in the Romantic period when the novella also gained its classical definition. Summing up different descriptions and definitions of the term by the brothers Schlegel, Tieck, Goethe, Novalis (and later also by Heyse), the novella is a brief fictional prose narrative shorter than a novel, which is usually concerned with a single significant event to which the entire narrative is dramatically and linearly oriented; its topic had to be taken from real life. Trying to broaden this definition with some more recent theories of novella, we can argue that the novella (contrary to the tale, which is characteristically less artistically refined and encompasses numerous episodes, or to the sketch, which does not focus on an event, an episode but on an

impressionistic emotional state or intimate reflection) has a typical narrative structure, it focuses on one, or at most two closely connected main events (the hawk theory) and is created in order to report on some unusual, extraordinary, fatal, unheard-of (Goethe), but real (or at least plausible) event. Many of the novellas by Kleist, Goethe, Hoffmann, Balzac, Mérimée and Pushkin belong to that kind of narrative, with elaborate exposition, gradation towards the dramatic climax, central event and the conclusion (i. e. the structure typical of the Renaissance novella as well).

In his conversations with Eckermann Goethe described this narrative form with a metaphor of a rose growing from its roots and ending in an unexpected but beautiful flower and added that the novella must have a symmetrical structure and realistic exposition. Yet German Romanticism not only kept its traditional form, but also added some new emphasis concerning the possible subject matter of the novella that was drawn from the growing Romantic interest for the irrational, surreal, its attitude towards religion, and also from the Romantic attempt to renew mythology.<sup>1</sup> This attempt could best be seen in some of the texts by Hoffmann, as well as in some of Goethe's remarks concerning his own prose writing.

Sigmund Freud, for example, in his treatise *Das Unheimliche* analysed the fantastic elements in Hoffmann's novellas, in particular in his novella *Der Sandmann*, and argued that those works evoke in their readers a specific feeling of horror, which is more than simple horror. He used to describe this feeling with the term *unheimlich* which is usually translated into English with the word *uncanny*. The German term, however, is ambiguous and thus untranslatable; in German the word denotes something foreign and domestic, horrifying and attractive at the same time. Freud claims that this feeling evokes in us the memory of a human animistic understanding of the world, the memory of the past (sacral) reality, which became unfamiliar and horrifying because it is distant to us now. According to Freud, Hoffmann with his novellas creates this same feeling of *unheimlich*.

Also Goethe's reflection concerning his own novellas was very similar to Freud's understanding of those by Hoffmann. In his conversations with Eckermann, he often touched upon the issue of the novella, in particular in connection to his novella, entitled simply *Novelle*. It was here that he used the metaphor of a rose, of an organic structure of the novella and of a realistic exposition. When insisting on the necessary surprising event in the novella, he also discussed the higher nature or ideal state to which this event points. Eckermann adds his own comment:

As a conclusion to Goethe's Novel, nothing is required but the feeling that the man is not quite deserted by higher beings, but that, on the contrary, they keep their eye on him, sympathize with him, and, in case of need, come to his assistance. There is something so natural in this belief, that it belongs to man, is a constituent part of his being, and is innate with all nations, as the foundation of all religion. (Oxenford 371)

It is widely known that this foundation of all religion Goethe also called *demonic*. When discussing Goethe's concept of *demonic* in his renowned book *Das Heilige*, the

Protestant theologian Rudolf Otto argued that Goethe uses this term for the feeling that surpasses every mind, that could not be rationally expressed and therefore remains incomprehensible, irrational. Goethe's *demonic* is then, according to Otto, one of the forms of the holy. The holy is defined by Otto in its relation towards the numinous as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, i. e. in its characteristic duality. And as one of the fundamental feelings of that duality Otto mentions also the feeling of *unheimlich*, which is in its expression similar to Goethe's notion of *demonic*.<sup>2</sup>

This specific meaning of the feeling of *unheimlich* (or *demonic*), which we touched upon here only briefly, shows that Romantic prose production witnessed a shift which will exert an important influence on the future development of different forms of short fiction. On the one hand, German Romantics resume the tradition of the novella and adopt its traditionally symmetrical structure with a surprising event at the forefront; on the other, they add new emphases regarding the subject matter, in particular irrationality, or rather *das Unheimliche*. It is also true that—as many of the novellas by Hoffmann prove—this feeling could be evoked through the traditional structure of the novella. But since the traditional structure with its narrative symmetry is not in accordance with the irrationality or uncertainty of the *unheimlich*, this new tendency seeks—in order to achieve the intended effect as fully as possible—a different, more suitable formal structure, indeed, a new genre of short fiction. And this is indeed achieved by Poe who adopts from the German Romantics this feeling of *unheimlich* (this term is used to denote his short fiction in Kilchenmann 31 ff.) and uses it for the underlying atmosphere in his stories, and at the same time (in accordance with his famous theory of short story) consistently introduces formal innovations which all results in the emergence of the short story proper.

The framework of the present study does not allow me to discuss in detail the Poe's closeness to the German Romanticism. It does seem necessary, though, to emphasize that the new genre emerged from that very need to express the new tendency as effectively as possible. The traditional symmetrical structure of novella, linearly oriented towards the central event, was appropriate for the depiction of unusual, surprising, fatal, but at the same time comprehensible events taken from the every day life of an ordinary person; however, its symmetry of form and subject matter which situated the events, although unusual, into the known, familiar world could not represent well that new, different tendency which stressed the human experience of discontinuity, uncertainty, irrationality, unknowability, the reality of the transcendence—that is of what the German Romantics called *das Unheimliche*. How different this tendency is, can perhaps best be demonstrated with the comparison of the formal differences between the novella and *Kurzgeschichte* (i. e. the short story proper) suggested by the German theoreticians Ruth Kilchenmann and Erna Kritsch Neuse.<sup>3</sup>

Their main arguments could be summarized as follows:

The novella is structured symmetrically, it rises linearly towards its climax and then declines, the sequence of events is logical and chronologically ordered; the short story proper, on the other hand, can be linear but also erratic, arabesquely reduced or elliptical, the events do not necessarily follow a logical or-

der;

The novella usually has a well-developed exposition, the main character is presented in considerable detail, also the time and place of the action are often defined; the short story proper more often starts with an open beginning, the main character simply emerges before an unprepared reader, the time and place of the action are usually not indicated;

The action in the novella is externally motivated and psychologically well-grounded; in the short story proper the motifs often remain unexplained, mysterious, barely sensed;

The novella depicts the hero against the background of a specific social environment, the narrator is omniscient in most cases in a third-person narrative; in the short story proper there is usually no concrete social setting; the heroes do not develop specific features of their characters, they do not develop psychologically; the point of view is almost always unified, the narrator is personal or neutral in mostly first-person narrative;

The action of the novella is explicit; in the short story proper the larger part of action is just sensed;

After reaching its climax the novella gradually closes down and finishes with a short report, with a general reflection, in more traditional novellas even with a moral; the short story proper, on the other hand, usually finishes with an open ending,<sup>4</sup> it stops abruptly, with a clear cut, usually unexpected, and its story remains uncompleted.

Those characteristics should not be understood as a watertight definition of both genres but more as the expression of their inner tendency. In accordance with this tendency, the typical novella is usually a third-person narrative with an elaborate exposition and characterization. The action usually intensifies linearly towards its climax which is an unusual event or—in the modern novella—a revelation, epiphany. At the end there is the denouement which concludes the story narratively and also metaphysically. On the other hand, the typical short story is usually a first-person narrative, without exposition and with incomplete characterization. Its action can be linearly or erratically intensified towards its climax which in a moment of crisis often concludes abruptly. The ending remains open, there is no narrative or metaphysical completion, there is, however, usually some irrational note present. The typical, classical novella is somehow more objective, while the typical short story proper is more subjective, and above all more nihilistic than the novella—and this metaphysical uncertainty makes the short story proper a more suitable medium for the expression of the feeling of *unheimlich*.

The development of both genres can be traced in the Euro-American post-romantic literature. Even after Goethe, Hoffmann and Kleist the traditional novella still remains important. It was developed by—to name just a few—Keller, Maupassant, Chekhov, L. N. Tolstoy, Pirandello, Th. Mann, Huxley, O' Connor, Camus, Hemingway, and in some works also Borges (e. g. *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*). However, it is the short story proper that nowadays grows in importance. We could trace its history from Hoffmann and Poe through Maupassant (e. g. *The Necklace*),

Brecht (*The Augsburg Chalk Circle*), Sartre (*The Wall*), Faulkner, Böll, Borchert to Atwood, Borges or Carver.

It is of extreme importance that in Germany the short story proper develops intensively in the period of crisis after the Second World War, and in some other literatures, for example in Canadian, American, Latin-American, Serbian, Croatian and Slovene, in the period of postmodernism—i. e. in the periods which could be called the periods of ontological uncertainty. The short story proper is structurally (the fragmentary state, ellipsis, open-endedness, subjectivity) and functionally (evoking the feeling of irrational, incomprehensible, unmanageable, mysterious, *unheimlich*) appropriate for the expression of feelings of uncertainty and crisis which appear in those periods. It could even be claimed that this characteristic makes the short story proper the quintessence of short fiction, of course, if we agree with Charles May's understanding of the function of short fiction: "Short fiction originated with the human need to narratize the perception of spiritual eruptions in the midst of the profane everyday world – those objectifications of fear or desire that Mircea Eliade has called the 'sacred' or 'true reality' for primitive man and woman." (May, "Forms of Reality: Reality in the Modern Short Story" 1993, 370). Metaphysical nihilism (if I may use Heidegger's term) of the modern person does not allow the holy to appear as the absolute or "true reality". The first ones to experience this with all its brutality were the romantics, who therefore strove for the reintegration of the holy into the everyday, secular life. And I believe that it was this double feeling of metaphysical groundlessness on the one hand and the intuitive sensation of the holy on the other that resulted in the emergence of a new genre: the short story proper.

The distinction between the novella and the short story proper and the argument that the latter is the genre of ontological uncertainty, however, do not cancel all ambiguities and differences in the understanding of the term short story which were mentioned at the beginning of this paper. It seems obvious at first sight that the terms novella and short story proper as used in some European literary studies do not cover the whole scope indicated by the American term short story. With that claim I do not only suggest that a more detailed analysis of the development in the last century should show significant, sometimes even radical modifications of the formal features of both genres while at the same time preserving their fundamental functions—the short fiction by the authors of American metafiction (eg. Barth, Barthelme, Coover) could certainly and rightfully be classified as prose of ontological uncertainty and should therefore be considered as pertaining to the genre of short story proper, although it does not usually show all those formal features presented above. However, there also arises the question whether the most characteristic form of what is called (according to many contemporary scholars, eg. May 1994) "the modern short story" does not reveal a different "formative will", as Lukács would put it, and consequently a new genre. I have in mind here that particular form of short story that does not grow from the legacy of Poe, but from that of Chekhov and Joyce (and which could also be found in Faulkner, I. Shaw, Steinbeck, Munro, H. Porter and to some extent also in Carver and Bartheleme) and which is characterized by a certain "impressionism" and the absence of event. I leave this question unanswered; it seems necessary to con-

clude with an open question to indicate that the short story does not allow theory to suggest any univocal and final definitions. Which is surely better for the future of the short story as an artistic form.

## Notes

1. See Charles May, "Forms of Reality: Reality in the Modern Short Story," *Style* 27 (1993): 369 – 379.
2. The importance of this *unheimlich* for the (Romantic) short fiction could also be found in May where considering the short story he discusses—with reference to Buber and Cassirer—the "uncanny moments" and "the momentary deity" (May, Charles. "The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction." *The New Short Story Theories*. Ed. Charles May (Athens: Ohio U P, 1994) 131 – 143. 137, 139).
3. See Kilchenmann 1968; Neuse, Erna Kritsch. *Die deutsche Kurzgeschichte* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1980).
4. The term is ambiguous because different authors bestow it with different and even contradictory meanings; see. Sugano, Marian Zwerling. "Beyond What Meets the Eye: The Photographic Analogy in Cortázar's Short Stories," *Style* 27 (1993): 332 – 351. 333; Clark, Miriam Marty. "After Epiphany: American Stories in the Postmodern Age," *Style* 27 (1993): 387 – 394. 389; Good, Graham. "Notes on the Novella." *The New Short Story Theories*. Ed. Charles E. May (Athens: Ohio U P, 1994) 147 – 164. 163; Kilchenmann 12, 18.

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