Is Style in Short Fiction Different from Style in Long Fiction?

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Résumé : Le style des fictions brèves est-il le même que celui des fictions longues ? Plus précisément, les nouvelles diffèrent-elles stylistiquement des romans (même si on ne considère que quelques types de nouvelles et quelques types de romans et que l'écart soit plus une question de degré que de nature) ? Dans le contexte d'un colloque sur le Style dans la Fiction, cet article définit quelques traits spécifiques à la nouvelle, en particulier quand ils diffèrent de ceux que l'on observe dans le roman. L'article débute avec des exemples dans lesquels il est difficile d'observer des différences notables entre nouvelles et romans. Je rappelle ensuite quelques caractéristiques généralement associées à la nouvelle. Enfin, mon étude se porte sur l'utilisation, dans certaines nouvelles (mais pas, telle est ma thèse, dans les romans) de ce que je nomme des passages de Grande Implication Emotionnelle qui diffèrent du reste de la nouvelle d'un point de vue formel et fonctionnel.

Mots-clés: fiction brève – fiction longue – émotions – genre.

Where long fiction and short fiction styles do not systematically diverge

What are the key features of style in fiction, according to Leech and Short in their book of that name? The features singled out in Chapter 3 include lexical features, grammatical features, figures of speech etc., and cohesion and context. It is doubtful that these are somehow consistently or predictably more (or less) prominent in long fiction than short fiction. What then of Chapter 6, which adopts and takes forward Roger Fowler's idea of 'mind style'? That notion is quite clear in the Leech and Short discussion; it has been rendered quite convoluted in some more recent treatments but has as its central and powerfully simple idea the thesis that in some kinds of narration—such as the

Benjy-focalised opening section of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*—the style discloses the mind. Similarly, in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, narrated by a boy who has Asperger's Syndrome, the claim is that the marked and remarked-upon style of this narration is as it is because it purports to be a representation or expression of an autistic boy's way of thinking and interpreting. There is always an element of virtuoso performance on the part of the writer in these efforts, along with doubts about good faith or fair dealing (how can Mark Haddon *really* know what goes on in the mind of someone with autism?) and even about logicality (how can dribbling, moaning, illiterate, virtually-languageless Benjy really have the degree of comprehension and orderliness, in sentences and paragraphs, that the opening section of Faulkner's novel attributes to him?).

> Caddy was walking. Then she was running, her booksatchel swinging and jouncing behind her.
>   "Hello, Benjy." Caddy said. She opened the gate and came in and stooped down. Caddy smelled like leaves. "Did you come to meet me." she said. "Did you come to meet Caddy. What did you let him get his hands so cold for, Versh." "I told him to keep them in his pockets." Versh said. "Holding on to that ahun gate."

These considerations in turn remind us of the pronounced fictionality of mind style narration. No-one, as far as I know, has attempted fictional depiction, using mind-style narration, of historical characters like Wittgenstein, Beethoven or Marie Curie, and one can see why a writer might be deterred.

Again, it seems unlikely that mind style will more naturally emerge in novels than in short stories, even if the sheer extent of the novel, and its opportunities to depict several characters in some depth, make a switching to a mind style easier to accommodate. Chapters 7 and 8 of *Style in Fiction* discuss the principles governing the rhetoric of literary text (e.g., manipulation of salience via changes in end-focus or subordination, and iconicity) and of literary discourse (e.g., the potentially multiple levels of discourse structure, the concepts of implied reader and author, the functioning of irony, tone and distance in discoursal point of view): again, there seems little reason to suppose that these are qualitatively different in stories than in novels. In short, there are plenty of dimensions of style in fiction, as surveyed in Leech and Short's 1981 study, where one would have difficulty in maintaining the claim that the stylistician had to be sensitive to whether the text for study were novel or story. The partial exception I will shortly turn to is caused by a functional/experiential consideration that applies especially sharply to the short narrative form: the imminence, from the outset, of the ending. But before discussing this stylistic and textural exception in detail, some general observations about what distinguishes the short story as a type of fiction are in order.

What defines the short story?

A minimalist hypothesis would be to assert that the short story differs from the novel essentially only in size or length, i.e., in the number of words used. Indeed if one adopted notional norms of say 5,000 words and 80,000 words respectively for story and novel, but allowed wide deviations from those standards, one might be able satisfactorily to sort the vast majority of stories and novels into the two categories with few exceptions. The average story length in Joyce's *Dubliners* is 5,000 words, while the length of his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is 86,000 words approximately. And so on, for very many 20th century stories and novels. I am inclined to see the story: novel size differential (here somewhat arbitrarily set at 1 to 16, which might reflect a reading-time contrast of roughly one hour and sixteen hours, accompanied by one drink by contrast with sixteen, suffering from typically one interruption in the reading as against sixteen such; read typically at one sitting as against sixteen for the novel; and so on.

Many other differences wholly depend from these different word-length norms. But shortness is identificatory rather than informatively definitional. We need to go back to Poe and his brilliant observations, to begin to build an informative description of the modern short story.

> Were we called upon, however, to designate that class of composition which, next to such a poem as we have suggested, should best fulfil the demands of high genius–should offer it the most advantageous field of exertion–we should unhesitatingly speak of the prose tale, as Mr. Hawthorne has here exemplified it. We allude to the short prose narrative, requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal. The ordinary novel is objectionable, from its length, for reasons already stated in substance. As it cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from *totality*. Worldly interests intervening during the pauses of perusal, modify, annul, or counteract, in a greater or less degree, the impressions of the book. But simple cessation in reading would, of itself, be sufficient to destroy the true unity. In the brief tale, however, the author is enabled to carry out the fullness of his intention, be it what it may. During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control.

If we combine Poe's observations with some simple practical considerations, we may reach the following interim conclusions:

- Short stories are mostly, and surely typically, read at one sitting.
- As a result, the reader who begins reading has in mind the completion of the reading in a way that the reader who embarks on a novel does not similarly have the novel's ending in contemplation.
- A reader who has in mind the completion of the reading of a story may extend that completion-mindedness to their reading of the narrative or text.

- Thoughts about how a story will conclude may be, throughout the reading of the story, more strongly an influence on that reader than they are on someone reading a novel (where these questions or pressures only fully take hold as the final few dozen pages are reached..)
- This extra focus, in the short story, on 'negotiating the end', on getting from middle to end, is purely a function of their brevity (in pages or reading time), one-sitting, integrated-compositional unity; but it feels different from or more than a purely practical inducement. The story as *genre* has developed effects, deviations, strategies, for working with and against that beginning-middle-end 'unity of effect' intensity that the story form favours.
- In Gerlach's words, "anticipation of the ending [is] used to structure the whole" (3).

The reference in the final point above is to the work of John Gerlach, in particular his 1985 study of the influence, on the structure of the modern short story, of the business of ending. Among other things Gerlach itemizes some of the main "signals of closure". These include:

- *solution of the central problem* (e.g., one faced by a character: once the problem is solved or the goal is reached, the reader feels a 'natural' sense that a termination is reasonable)
- *natural termination* (the completion of an action which itself has a recognised beginning, middle and end: a journey, the writing of a book, the construction of a building, the conclusion of a meal;
- *completion of antithesis* ("any opposition, often characterized by irony, that indicates something has polarized into extremes" [10])
- *manifestation of a moral* ("the reader's sense that a theme has emerged" [12])
- *encapsulation* ("a coda that distances the reader from the story by altering the point of view or summarizing the passing of time" [12])

But, it should be emphasized, these are more often signals of closure operating on the level of *narrative* and do not guarantee *thematic* or *heuristic* closure. The late Per Winther (2004: 63) gives two good examples, from celebrated stories, where narrative closure does not entail thematic closure or resolution: at the end of Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener", the reader continues to ponder all the more why Bartleby declined to participate in life, beyond selective tasks of copying; and in Hemingway's "Hills like white elephants", the wait for the train comes to a 'natural' end, but really nothing concerning the proposed abortion or the couple's relationship has been resolved.

The distinct function and stylistic texture of HEI passages in stories

I will argue that one of the ways in which some (by no means all) modern and contemporary short stories differ from novels is in their inclusion of what I will call a High Emotional Involvement (HEI) passage. This HEI

passage is stylistically distinct, and its 'arresting' function reflects the possibility that it is a necessary feature of such stories (but not, of course, a sufficient one). In this large sub-group of modern short stories, crucial effects are achieved by the inclusion of such a passage of text, which may be epiphanic, or a turning-point, or involve some other shift to a level of greater reader attention. When such a HEI passage occurs, it tends to be close to the end of the text (for good narratological reason). More tentatively I suggest that HEI passages of this kind are common and characteristic of many short stories, but rare and exceptional in novels, thus a genre feature of (some) short stories.

HEI passages are distinctive in form as well as in function. On the basis of an array of linguistic criteria (density of negation, presence of projecting evaluative mental process verbs like *see, know* and *feel*; sentence-complexity; semi-grammaticality; temporal marking; absolute/extreme lexis; etc.) these passages differ texturally from the grammar/texture of the rest of the stories in which they arise. They appear to have their own local grammar, which helps to induce the reader to recognize them as the crucial passages they are. Below, I will attempt to show the relevance of ten identified linguistic markers of HEI-passage status, making reference to one story, "Boxes", by Raymond Carver (for discussions of HEI passages in other stories by Alice Munro and John McGahern, see Busse et al. 2010, Toolan 2011, 2012).

Why such an HEI passage is (arguably) necessary in some short stories relates to the very shortness of short fiction: the fact that it draws us into a 'contractual' relationship with a fairly elaborately projected text-world and its characters and their conditions of existence *even as* we very well know that this world, this pageant, will soon depart. Our reading of the very opening lines of a short story are shadowed by our awareness of its brevity, its proximate ending, in a way that is significantly different from our orientation as we embark on the reading of a novel. In the latter, we have minimal awareness or consideration of the ending, as we begin reading. Stories accordingly are end-shaped in ways that rarely apply to novels; in particular, they may draw the reader into at least one moment or passage of strongly-felt ethical and emotional insight, or challenge, or intensity, to warrant our attention to what might otherwise be dismissed as the story of an hour.

Reading to be moved

The brevity of the story as reading experience, and the possibility of writer control of 'the reader's soul' in Poe's terms, should facilitate and intense reading experience, of brief but intense immersion. On the other hand that same

brevity can prompt the reader to question whether their time and attention are being well spent, whether (in relevance-theoretic terms) the cognitive benefits they derive are truly commensurate with the costs incurred. This is where a late-sited HEI passage, more moving and thought-provoking than any earlier segment of the narrative, and also more thickly-textured stylistically, is logically and aesthetically warranted.

My first identifications of stylistically-rich, emotionally-involving passages were as a responding reader: I noticed, and believed that many other readers noticed, a sequence of three textual 'peaks' (the last being the most extreme) distributed through the text of McGahern's story "All Sorts of Impossible Things". I found, again as a reader, a similar near-final 'most moving' narrative moment or section in numerous other stories by modernists and contemporaries (Joyce, Mansfield, Carver, Munro, Beattie, Gallant, etc.). Some of these passages equate with what literary critics have long called 'epiphanies', but plenty do no; besides, while the idea of an ephiphany is centred on some moment of revelation (anagnorisis) experienced by an erstwhile purblind protagonist, the critical beneficiary in the HEI passages I was identifying was the reader. And my interest was and is in quite what effects such passages have on readers, and the degree to which a matrix of stylistic features is instrumental in those effects—to the point that, were the specific features removed (mental process projections, repetitions, negation, etc.), then the experiential effect would be dissipated.

So, to reiterate, my readerly impression of 'exceptional immersion' was what came first. But close behind came questions as to the kind of narrative passage or situation in which one might predict a reader would feel most moved or immersed. This seemed to me a non-trivial question, since it was easy enough to think of story passages that are not particularly immersive. I speculated that the kind of narrative passage in which we readers seem most likely to develop emotional engagement is one where a speaker or focalized character is presented (or is inferable), in a particularized imaginable situation, and we learn explicitly or implicitly what *they* feel strongly about (in the narrative present) or are moved by or emotionally engaged by. Turning to the linguistic 'reflexes' of the narrative presentation of a character's strong feelings, the most direct and unmetaphorised linguistic means of expressing such features seemed to me to include deictic expressions (especially temporal ones), volitive modality, evaluative mental verbs, and Free Indirect Thought. But to some extent I was guided by the text, rather than setting out to find just particular features in these HEI passages.

It was for that reason that initially I focussed on the verb *feel* (*felt*) and the derived nominal, *feeling*, particularly where these projected or were complemented by a full proposition. In the narrative (non direct speech) parts of all three high-emotion passages in the McGahern story, *feel, feeling, felt* were quite prominent with these functions. Here are just a few instances:

> 'Will you marry me or not? I want an answer one way or the other this evening.' He **felt** his whole life like a stone on the edge of a boat out on water.

> He wanted a haircut, and that night, as the teacher wrapped the towel round the instructor's neck and took the bright clippers out of their pale-green cardboard box, adjusting the combs, and started to clip, the black hair dribbling down on the towel, he **felt** for the first time ever a mad desire to remove his hat and stand bareheaded in the room, as if for the first time in years he **felt** himself in the presence of something sacred.

> As he petted her [the greyhound, named Coolcarra Queen] down, gripping her neck, bringing his own face down to hers, thinking how he had come by her, he **felt** the same rush of **feeling** as he had **felt** when he watched the locks of hair fall on to the towel round the neck in the room;

As a projecting predicate, *feel/felt* is interestingly more opaque, thus requiring more readerly effort of interpretation, than the standard discourse-projecting verbs *said* and *thought*. In the McGahern story we are told that the focalising character *felt a wild longing to...walk round the world bareheaded.* By contrast you cannot (grammatically) say a wild longing or think a wild longing; and the things that you *can* say or think come already interpreted, reduced to propositional form: e.g., *he said he wanted to walk round the world bareheaded, he thought he would walk round the world bareheaded.* Nevertheless *feel/felt,* which falls into semantic category X 2.1 ('thought, belief') in the Wmatrix array of semantic classifications, is only one of several simplest mental-verb cues of involving/immersing narration (others include metaphorical *see,* and *know*). More importantly, closer stylistic analysis of putatively HEI passages, in comparison with ambient text, has led to the identification of a number of stylistic features, a sampling of which seem to tend to co-occur, and intensively, in these narrative sections.

HEI (emotively immersive) passages tend to contain more of some of the following than the ambient text does:

1. Key projecting verbs are *know* and *see* and *feel* and *want* (or metaphorised equivalents of these: *come upon*, *reach*). But textual sites of emotion/immersion may not be marked by 'emotional' language alone; or … (*feel, desire, want...*).

2. Negation is widespread: *a lack of hope, no comfort, that wasn't what...*;

3. Sentence grammar is comparatively elaborate, complex; or sentences are longer; or use of nominal clauses and clefting is more prominent; mostly, the focalising character will be sentence Subject.

4. In part *because* sentences/clauses are longer, their internal rhythms tend to be more developed; and this in turn may make the passage feel (be) more poetic, with richer tonality or voicing than adjacent text.

5. Much more noticeably than elsewhere in the narration, standard sentence grammar may be departed from; sentences (e.g. lacking a Subject or finite main verb, or easily recoverable ellipsis relative to a previous sentence) may border on the ungrammatical.

6. More temporal simultaneity (marked by *As he did x, he felt y* structures, which typically combine report of a *physical* or external narrated event with report of a mental or internal event/reaction/insight; hence a double telling); more temporal staging, or multiply-coordinated processes or events…

7. Absolute/ultimate words: *everlasting*, *never, rock-bottom, deeper than she could ever have managed, on and on, all there was...final*

8. heat, light and dimension words are prominent: *cold, dark, deep, rock-bottom, inflammation.*

9. A higher density of lexical and structural repetition and para-repetition in HEI passages than elsewhere; kinds of para-repetition mean that there are noticeable possibilities of inter-substitutability of words, phrases, within the HEI. In effect, the passages are highly rhetorically crafted. The lexical repetitions (in HEI passages) may make links with lexis (thus situations) from earlier in the story, or they may be intra-HEI repetitions, or both. (This dense repetition has a **Focussing** and **Arresting** function, relative to the narrative progressing properties of most of the text; see Shklovsky for an early formulation of this idea.]

10. More likely to find Free Indirect Thought here than in the non-HEI co-text…

Alongside all of the above should come an acknowledgment that textual sites of emotion and immersion may not invariably be marked by these 'emotional' features, and the features are often highly metaphorised in their instantiation (come on for sensed/saw)

Space-limitations forbid an extensive demonstration here, but consider the following short passage, which I submit has the characteristic HEI function, and occurs just three paragraphs from the end of Raymond Carver's story "Boxes".

> I don't know why, but it's then I recall the affectionate name my dad used sometimes when he was talking nice to my mother—those times, that is, when he wasn't drunk. It was a long time ago, and I was a kid, but always, hearing it, I felt better, less afraid, more hopeful about the future. *"Dear,"* he'd say. He called her "dear" sometimes—a sweet name. "Dear," he'd say, "if you're going to the store, will you bring me some cigarettes?" Or "Dear, is your cold any better?" "Dear, where is my coffee cup?"
>
> The word issues from my lips before I can think what else I want to say to go along with it. "Dear." I say it again. I call her "dear." "Dear, try not to be afraid," I say. I tell my mother I love her and I'll write to her, yes. Then I say good-bye, and I hang up.

Clearly the most striking stylistic feature (an instance of type 9) is the repetition, eight times in five lines, of the word *dear*. And it is easy to show both that *dear* occurs more here than anywhere else in the text (since in fact it

occurs nowhere else in the story), and that no other lexical item occurs as densely, as locally-repetitively, as *dear* does. Once one strips out the high frequency grammatical items (*I, the, she, and*, etc.), the high frequency lexical items are not numerous (they include *mother, says, place, tell, want, house*— these latter with a story-wide frequency of 12) and their recurrence is always easily explained on story-topic grounds. More importantly, none of them clusters, collocates with itself, in just the way *dear* does. The nearest *house* comes to multiple local recurrence, for instance, is the fact that it occurs three times in the 9 lines of the final paragraphs.

But the repetition of *dear* is only one type of 'heightened texturing', and it is worth noting that several of the other types are also at work here, disproportionately relative to their appearance in the rest of the narrative text. Consider type 6, temporal staging and simultaneity. Here below I underline all the textual elements in the passage that arguably contribute to the kind of emphatic temporal particularity recurrently found in HEI passages:

> I don't know why, but <u>it's then</u> I recall the affectionate name my dad used <u>sometimes</u> <u>when</u> he was talking nice to my mother—<u>those times</u>, that is, <u>when</u> he wasn't drunk. It was <u>a long time ago</u>, and I was a kid, but <u>always</u>, hearing it, I felt better, less afraid, more hopeful about the future. *"Dear,"* he<u>'d</u> say. He called her "dear" <u>sometimes</u>—a sweet name. "Dear," he<u>'d</u> say, "if you're going to the store, will you bring me some cigarettes?" Or "Dear, is your cold any better?" "Dear, where is my coffee cup?"
>
> The word issues from my lips <u>before</u> I can think what else I want to say to go along with it. "Dear." I say it <u>again</u>. I call her "dear." "Dear, try not to be afraid," I say. I tell my mother I love her and I'll write to her, yes. <u>Then</u> I say good-bye, and I hang up.

It may be pointed out—and this is most palpable to anyone who has read the whole story—that this passage involves thematically an 'opening out', an recalled past and injunctions about the future ("try not to be afraid") and that therefore almost inescapably there may be more temporal marking in such a passage. But even this challenge can be accommodated if we speculate that it is in the nature of highly-immersive HEI passages to co-opt the reader into the seeing, beyond the narrative present, of characters' pasts and futures. Again a critical question is whether temporal marking is anywhere else in the story encoded in the density that is found here (approximately 12 markers in approximately 130 narrative words, or one every 11 words). This is less easy to demonstrate, since it is by no means easy to extract all and only those words in a text with 'temporal marking' function. But we can use Wmatrix's N6 category(frequency) to capture all the narrative (non direct speech) instances in the text of *always* 3*, sometimes* 4*, again* 7; and its N4 (linear order) tag to capture all 31 narrative instances of *then.* For these four temporal types, then, there are 45 narrative tokens in the entire text, or roughly one every 110 words

of running text; if the narrative portion of the story is estimated at 4,000 words, these 45 tokens should occur on average every 85 narrative words. Clearly, their density in the HEI passage is far, far greater than this (and of course in turn means that their frequency *outside* this passage is rather lower than so far indicated). Since always, sometimes, again and then occur a total of 6 times in these 130 words of narrative text (one per 22 words); the other 39 must occur in the remaining 2870 narrative words at a frequency of one per 74 words. This is all very laborious, agreed. But it perhaps helps to show that even less glaringly foregrounded features than the repeated *dear* are disproportionately densely deployed in the HEI passage. A further text manipulation to consider, of course, would concern the effect on the passage, *qua* emotive-immersive passage, if this density of temporal marking were quietly reduced.

To conclude: when contemplating what is different about short stories and by extension about short story style, word-length is our one certainty, with consequences. Short stories are mostly, and surely typically, read at one sitting. As a result, the reader who begins reading has in mind the completion of the reading in a way that the reader who embarks on a novel does not. A reader who has in mind the completion of the reading of a story will or may spread that completion-mindedness to their reading of the whole narrative. I suggest that the process of ending, of closure, of how the story will conclude, is—*throughout* the reading of a story—more strongly an influence on the reader than they are for someone reading a novel (where these questions or pressures only fully take hold as the final few dozen pages are reached). This extra focus, in the short story, on 'negotiating the end', of getting from middle to end, is purely a function of their brevity (in pages or reading time), one-sitting, integrated-compositional unity; but it feels different from such a purely physical/practical inducement. And the story as *genre* has developed effects, deviations, strategies, for working with and against that beginning-middle-end 'unity of effect' intensity that the story form favours. In Gerlach's words, "anticipation of the ending [is] used to structure the whole" (3). If we ask ourselves how, in the inescapable context of the long narrative (the novel or romance), it can be that a story can justify so soon coming to a halt, terminating its reporting of characters and situation, then for *some* stories, part of an answer may be: by providing an HEI 'moment', or episode, of exceptional emotional and intellectual insight.

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