

Gender and Genre Issues in Short Stories

Written by Women¹

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Abstract

In this round table we intend to review the remarkable contribution of women to the development of the short story in English as well as to discuss the possibility of detecting gender differences in their stories both at a thematic and at an aesthetic level. Therefore, M^a Jesús Lorenzo Modia will describe the antecedents of the short story in the eighteenth century through the emergence of periodical publications such as *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. Stories by male and female writers included in these and other publications will be analysed by Lorenzo Modia in order to provide a panorama of the eighteenth-century short story.

Margarita Estévez Saá will review the proliferation of short stories written by women in the nineteenth century and study the peculiar case of the ghost story, a favourite “subgenre” for women readers and writers.

María Losada Friend will exemplify with the figure of Edna O’Brien and her work *Lantern Slides*, the contribution of women writers to the so-called “composite novel” commenting on its function as a unifying structure of short stories and studying some of its antecedents and possible sequels in English and Irish literature.

Finally, José Manuel Estévez Saá will discuss the panorama of multiethnic postcolonial short stories written by

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women in the twentieth century and the interest of the thematic and aesthetic concerns displayed by their authors.

The participants in the Round Table “Gender and Genre Issues in Short Stories Written by Women” briefly addressed some issues related to problems of definition of the literary genre of the short story and singled out women’s contribution to its development in English.

They contended that the enormous amount of work that women writers and readers did for the creation of short fiction has not been widely recognized. For this purpose, attention was initially paid to the so-called long eighteenth century. María Jesús Lorenzo Modia explained that for most of us, if asked for names of eighteenth-century women writers, it would be difficult to come up with a list of names, and very often even to offer any name at all. This tells us much about the invisibility of women writers in this period in any literary genre, and in the short story, too. However, there was a striking development of the narrative genre in this century and women contributed actively to it. As is known, the eighteenth century is the period in which fiction, in general, was being consolidated as a genre. Short fiction played a determining role in it. Obviously, as Lorenzo Modia explained, here we should open the discussion of how short or long a short story is and about the boundaries of short fiction, novelettes, and fiction in a general sense. Regarding this point, it is widely acknowledged that in this period one should not be restrictive because of the manifold origins of fiction and the lack of strict correspondence of terms between what we now call a novel or a tale and what at the time was termed with these labels. As a first example, Lorenzo Modia mentioned Aphra Behn’s *The Wandering Beauty. A Novel* (1698), published in 1700 in *Histories, Novels and Translations* (1700), of less than 20 pages. Other labels for what we now call short-stories are *memoir*, *story*, *history*, and *tale*. *Novel* was used as a derogatory term for scandal texts, and therefore it was avoided by many authors in this century, although as early as 1700 Aphra Behn dared to use it in a way which is surprising for present-day readers.

Delarivier Manley published in 1714 *The Adventures of Rivella*, a text which has approximately 60 pages in a modern edition. In its title-page it is said that it contains secret memoirs, which indicates that it may be a scandal chronicle; accordingly, the author, in order to avoid

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prosecution for authorship of this kind of text, states that it has been “done into English from the French” (1714: 39) and even includes a preface by the translator. In this period the term *Memoirs* was used in order to indicate the verisimilitude of the text, i.e. claiming that it was based on real life.

In 1725 *Familiar Letters Betwixt a Gentleman and a Lady* appeared, by Mary Davys, which can be included in the tradition of the classical literary epistle, as well as in that of sentimental fiction. The structure is an epistolary one, but some of the letters have a short inserted narration, taking the pattern of the tale within the tale.

Sarah Fielding also wrote short narratives, which can be found inserted in a longer text. She published *The Governess, or Little Female Academy* in 1749, where she advocated and practised story-telling and -writing as an educational method in the boarding school described in the text. In this sense, it can be considered as a pioneer text as it is the first one, to the best of my knowledge, which deals with educating girls by means of fiction as part of the academic curriculum.

Lorenzo Modia also contended that the function of women as readers was also fundamental for the genre. Literature in general and stories in particular were welcomed as the best way to educate them and also as a form of socialising and escaping their limited lives. They were dependent on men, fathers, brothers, husbands, or tutors. They were not allowed to work for money, if they belonged to the middle class, and their only way out was marriage. If a woman rejected marriage, was not able to marry, or was a widow, she became a burden for the family and was forced to enter the marriage market in any way possible. Thus, stories were used as a teaching method for readers in general, too. They allowed emotional escapes for women both individually and as a group. As is well known, stories were read by women individually but reading in groups was also widespread both at schools and in social gatherings. They had didactic functions, either overtly or covertly, but they were mainly used for leisure and as a source for knowledge. This didactic function of the short story is also present in the periodical publications that appeared in the eighteenth century, since in many publications, both by male and female authors we have stories interspersed in the different numbers. Examples of these are *The Tatler* (1709-1711), *The Female Tatler* (1709-1710), *The*

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Spectator (1711-1714), *The Guardian* (1713), and *The Female Spectator* (1744-1746).

Another aspect to be taken into account in the communication process between writers and readers, and that Lorenzo Modia addressed, was the market for literature. In order to become professional writers women used subscription lists as a resource. Very often they needed funding in advance in order to survive, and this was provided either by the subscribers or by literary patrons to whom they dedicated the texts. Readers who could not afford to subscribe or had no patronage had access to a new form of literature distribution in this period, that of circulating libraries. Obviously, periodicals and magazines were widespread in the eighteenth century, and they were also used as an excellent means to publish short stories.

Lorenzo Modia's point, therefore, was to emphasize that abbreviated fiction became very popular already in the eighteenth century and that it included foreign short stories, character studies, extended anecdotes, tales, humorous fragments, etc. As Harold Orel acknowledges, in his Introduction to his book *The Victorian Short Story: Development and Triumph of a Literary Genre*, it is surprising that "never once did an author attempt to analyze the aesthetics of abbreviated fiction" (1986: i). He takes his argument further when mentioning that neither in the nineteenth century did the Victorians "satisfactorily defined the distinction between 'factual accounts, imaginative essays, and fictional narratives'" (1986: 3) and that "neither writers of fiction nor literary critics were interested in debating the aesthetics of the short story as a genre, particularly since efforts to define the novel all too easily foundered" (1986: 3). One possible answer both to the problems of definition and to the proliferation of abbreviated fiction was related to the passing of the Stamp Acts (especially in 1725). According to the government, those periodicals that included news and were liable to duty should pay the taxes. Meanwhile those that simply offered entertainment were free from the tax. It is not surprising, therefore, to see the popularity and appropriateness of abbreviated fiction to which English women writers so readily contributed. Lorenzo Modia's position was that one should not be too restrictive when deciding what a short story is.

Margarita Estévez Saá commented on short stories written by women in the nineteenth century. The Victorian age, as we all know,

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implied the definitive popularisation of short fiction even though problems of definition persisted. The circumstances that favoured the writing and publication of short stories were, besides the higher rate of literacy after the Elementary Education Act of 1879, some technical developments that encouraged the publication of magazines and periodicals such as the invention of the linotype (Ottmar Mergenthaler, 1885; improved by Max Levy in 1890) which increased the speed of production, or the reduction of the costs thanks to the change from steam, gas and water to electricity as the power-source for printing houses. Even on the verge of the twentieth century, short stories were not usually published in volumes. Therefore, magazines such as *Macmillan's Magazine* (1859-1907), *Cornhill Magazine*, *Temple Bar Magazine* (1860-1906), *Longman's Magazine* (1882-91), *Blackwood's* and *The Strand Magazine* provided the most common outlet for the short story. However, problems of definition still persisted. Estévez Saá mentioned how the above-mentioned Harold Orel maintains that

[T]hese literary histories, which persist in beginning their review of the evolution of a genre in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, never attempt to demonstrate why the thousands of stories published in periodicals prior to the 1880s are uniformly uninteresting or irrelevant to their considerations; they fail to review the implications of the fact that some of England's greatest short-story writers were happily active, and reasonably well-reimbursed for their short stories by magazine editors (by themselves, as in the case of Dickens and Trollope), long before the demise of the three-decker novel, when, according to their interpretation, the short story emerged from relative obscurity. (1986: 192)

Estévez Saá agreed that "some larger considerations in the history of the nation must also be considered if the development of the genre is to be accounted complete" (Orel, 1986: 192), and she signalled that, again, many women contributed to the list of writers of short

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stories, despite the fact that the above mentioned Orel does only study male short story writers in his book (William Carleton, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, Thomas Hardy, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad and H. G. Wells). Among the vast number of short stories, what some critics call the “subgenre” of the ghost story became especially popular. Ghost stories were written in the nineteenth century by both male and female authors. Estévez Saá provided numerous examples and even mentioned the existence of a very interesting web page (*Horrormasters.com*) which has a special section devoted exclusively to women’s contribution to this particular type of short stories (“Ladies of Horror”). Some critics wonder why it was that so many women were attracted by the ghost story (Cox et. al. Brogan, Dickerson), and Estévez Saá explained that this remains an unanswered critical issue and that some of the reasons given by critics that make reference to socio-economic reasons, psychological bias, etc., only provide a partial answer. Going further in this debate, Estévez Saá mentioned the work by Lynette Carpenter and Wendy Colmar who go as far as to suggest that women’s ghost stories were different from men’s. They say that women wrote with a different sensibility and had distinctive concerns that can be detected in their short fiction. This is probably a quite essentialist interpretation, very difficult to sustain, as Estévez Saá explained during her intervention.

When considering short stories written by women within the framework of “gender and genre”, we cannot forget the role of the composite novel. The aim of Losada Friend’s intervention was to prove the convergence of this specific narrative format and the perspective of gender in Irish short stories, pointing at its use within the tradition of the Irish novel, and indicating the relevant presence of female contribution in its development and evolution. The composite novel – she argued– is one literary narrative genre that has found slowly but firmly its place among other types of narratives with a voice of its own. Also acknowledged as short-story cycle, patchwork novel, short story compound or integrated short story collection, it enriches the concept of the novel, being a group of different stories that present the main purpose of the narrative with an unusual, experimental structure. Its use proves the author’s desire to have all in one, offering in one compact nucleus the diversity of simultaneous stories.

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Dunn and Morris (1995) set its origins in the 1820s and pointed out its maturity in the twentieth century. They found its beginnings in the village sketch tradition by George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858) or Louise May Alcott's *Hospital Sketches* (1869). Losada Friend stated that curiously they overlooked the fact that, in that same century, Mark Twain was already making use of this strategy for the creation of his characters. In the preface of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) Twain pointed already at the combination of traces that constructed his protagonist: "Huck Finn is drawn from life; Tom Sawyer also, but not from an individual; he is a combination of the characteristics of three boys whom I knew, and therefore belongs to the composite order of architecture" (1876, 1986: 3).

The careful construction of pieces that Twain used to draw Tom Sawyer from life finds its parallel in the way in which a composite novel is made, providing different stories but simultaneously presenting them in a whole coherent picture. Its recurrent use has woven a strong literary tradition, partly maintained by the fact that new authors keep looking back at models to create and innovate progressively, as Losada Friend showed in the case of 1997 Booker Prize Graham Swift's *Last Orders* (1997) which takes William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) as a mirror. In both novels, chapters are entitled with the name of the different characters, each of them revealing thoughts on the death and burial of a dead protagonist. For both authors, different characters' traumas and traces of different personal lives are exposed within a unified whole.

The development of composite novels in the English language (Davis, 2001) runs parallel to the outstanding directions that the Irish novel has taken. The Irish composite novel shows also the need to stick to tradition but the desperate yearning to depart from it. Its development proves also the progressive emergence of Irish women writers and Irish women protagonists in this type of narrative. To lay the basis for the debate, it was useful for Losada Friend to question why *Dubliners* has been for a long time considered the only relevant composite novel in Ireland. It can be argued that Maria Edgeworth shyly added a peculiar contribution to it with the complex structure of *Castle Rackrent* (1796) in her attempt to explain the decadence of the English absentees through the confessions of Thady. Obviously, the

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series of independent pictures in Thady's mixture of memoir and confession helped Edgeworth to make the veiled and ambiguous comment on the relations between the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy and the Irish people. Thus, Losada Friend suggested that it would be interesting to open up lines of research that would deal with other similar attempts in female voices before Joyce.

Undoubtedly, *Dubliners* can be considered one classic Irish composite novel. The book became an emblematic reference in the convergence of a realistic novel and the beginning of modernism. Its structure as a composite production permeated the new attempts by other male Irish authors (Different examples were given, such as James Plunkett's *Strumpet City*, still classified today as a "novel" in spite of its nature as a "composite novel." What interested Losada Friend was precisely the position that Plunkett acknowledged for himself within the tradition, as he specified his interest in a narrative form in which all elements could fit).

However, Losada Friend argued, *Dubliners'* influence took a new direction when the composite novel fell into the hands of women writers. Edna O'Brien, always aware of Joyce's presence, created her own personal understanding of the composite novel with *Lantern Slides* (1990). Taking the baton in female tradition, she joined different short narrative "slides" in one novel, far from Joyce's living dead. O'Brien attempts the search for new protagonists, mainly single women, and starts a new line that has been interpreted as a liberating sign by critics as Sandra Manoogian Pear (1995), who listed many of O'Brien departures from Joyce, defending her yearnings for the representation of a new generation, pointing at her conscious omission of epiphanic moments, the presence of ironic narrators, or her feminist rewritings. O'Brien extends and expands the possibilities of the composite novel, compared to other contemporary male authors who have rewritten Joyce focusing only on one of his stories (Ben Forkner among others has pointed out at William Trevor's "Two More Gallants" and "A Bit of Business" (2001: 13). As part of a generation which produced what is denominated "high comic post-Joycean satire" (Forkner, 2001: 29), her work is part of an actual extensive critical reading in a process towards the re-definition of the city in Irish literature, with works such as those edited by Gillis and Kelly, specifically Desmond Fitzgibbon's approach to the Irish city after Joyce (2001).

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If Edna O'Brien set a new line in the use of the composite novel, Anne Enright and Jennifer Johnston use a similar narrative format in their contributions in *Finbar's Hotel* (1997). This is the closest exercise to a composite novel within the experiments around the contemporary Irish short story. It provides a complex elaboration of one novel written by many relevant names in the Irish contemporary scene: Roddy Doyle, Anne Enright, Hugo Hamilton, Jennifer Johnston, Joseph O'Connor, and Colm Tóibín. It is a book "devised" and edited by Dermot Bolger, where female and male authors form an "ensemble" in seven chapters, with seven different characters (weekend breakers, tourists or staff) who spend a night in a decrepit hotel which is living through its last days of life. Many standard organizing principles of the composite novel are maintained as the editor cunningly joins each chapter, linked through the number of the hotel rooms, leaving it to discerning readers to identify the authorship of each chapter. Ironically enough, most clients and staff seem to be escaping from some trauma or experience and their contemporary paralysis could point to the fact that, perhaps, *Dubliners*, and its shadow are still present. Losada Friend also pointed out the fact that, after this heterogeneous project, Bolger edited a new one, *Ladies' Night at Finbar's Hotel* (1999), this time counting only on the collective impulse of women authors, with the aid of Maeve Binchy, Clare Boylan, Emma Donoghue, Anne Heverty, Ellis Ní Dhuibhne, Kate O'Riordan, and Deidre Purcell.

Losada Friend ended her intervention pointing out an Irish tradition that has progressively proved the need for a place for female voices (authors and protagonists) within a specific experimental narrative framework, the composite novel in its various forms. This narrative technique has provided us with the rejection of a plain, absolute Irish identity, and with the possibility of exposing the Irish identity of many selves simultaneously.

Finally, José Manuel Estévez Saá, then lecturer at the University of Seville, commented on some aspects of the state of the contemporary short story and addressed some genre considerations that he also related to gender issues.

He began recalling some voices who have been recently expressing their preoccupation with the present circumstances of the short story. The editors of some of the most relevant anthologies of

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short stories written by women had already, in the 90's, lamented the disappearance of well-known literary magazines. To give an example, this is what Susan Hill contends in her *Penguin Book of Contemporary Women's Short Stories* (1995), when she laments that “[t]here are relatively few outlets for short stories now –magazines publish few, small literary periodicals have dwindled in number. Yet publishers do from time to time show confidence by issuing collections of stories by unknown writers and sales are not always dismal” (1995: ix). Also, in Hill's edition of *The Second Penguin Book of Modern Women's Short Stories* (1998), a similar idea is conveyed:

Outlets for short stories get fewer and fewer. [...] One or two small magazines, with very modest circulations, struggle bravely on, publishing new short stories –the esteemed *London Magazine* and *Stand*, and *Panurge*, from the North of England, but few large circulation magazines and journals publish any fiction. Radio Four is one of the last bastions of good short story broadcasting but there is too little of it. (1998: ix)

Notwithstanding, Hill also emphasised women's continuing interest in writing short stories: “In spite of this, huge numbers of people, and particularly women, continue to write short stories, without much hope of having them published, no matter how good they may be” (1998: ix).

More recently, Stephen King has also voiced his fears in relation to the genre in an article published last September in the *New York Times* that was significantly entitled “What Ails the Short Story”. As a consequence of his editing *The Best American Short Stories 2007*, he reflects that the American short story is alive but not well. He grounds his argument in the progressive lack of interest in the genre that he detects not only in readers but in bookstores when they, significantly enough, place magazines (*Tim House*, *Zoetrope: All-Story*, *glimmer Train*, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *Five Points*, *The Kenyon Review*, *American Short Fiction*, *The Iowa Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, etc.) on their lowest shelves.

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This on-going debate contrasts, in Estévez Saá's opinion, with two phenomena he briefly commented on and that directly affect women writers of short stories:

- 1) It is true that literary magazines are no longer what they used to be. In this sense, however, he maintained that they are being replaced by on-line magazines (many of them are free) that are making a very interesting effort at spreading the work of novel writers. A look at the contents of their different issues demonstrates women's active participation. Estévez Saá mentioned, as an instance, *Newpages.com*, where anyone interested in the publishing of short stories on-line can have a look at the more than one hundred on-line magazines, alphabetically ordered. One can even have access to the contents of most of these magazines as well as to the texts of the free ones: http://newpages.com/npguides/litmags_online.htm.
- 2) The proliferation of anthologies that focus on women writers of short stories from different communities (Indian, South Asian, Caribbean, Latin American, American Jewish, British Jewish, Scottish, Irish, Palestinian, Lebanese, Iranian, Arab, etc.): Geeta Dharmaran, ed., *Separate Journeys: Short Stories by Contemporary Indian Women* (2004); Kali For Women, ed., *Truth Tales: Contemporary Stories by Women Writers of India* (1990); Deepa Mathur, ed., *Odyssey: Short Stories by Indian Women Writers Settled Abroad* (1998); Shyam Selvadurai, ed., *Story-Wallah: Short Fiction from South Asian Writers* (2005); Dalya Cohen-Mor, ed., *Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* (2005); Jo Glanville, ed., *Quissat: Short Stories by Palestinian Women* (2006); Roseanne Saad Khalaf, ed., *Hikayat: Short Stories by Lebanese Women* (2006); Basmenji Kaveh, ed., *Afsaneh: Short Stories by Iranian Women* (2005); Carmen C. Estevez, and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gerbert, eds., *Green Cane and Juicy Flotsam: Short Stories by Caribbean Women* (1991); Celia Correas Zapata, ed., *Short Stories by Latin American Women: The Magic and the Real* (2003); Jane Aaron, ed., *A View Across the Valley: Short Stories by Women from Wales, 1850-1950* (1999); Janet Thomas and Patricia Duncker, eds., *The Woman Who Loved Cucumbers: Contemporary Short Stories by Women from Wales* (2002); Joyce Antler, ed., *America and I: Short Stories by American Jewish Women Writers* (1991); Laura Phillips and Marion Baraitser,

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eds., *Morolecai's First Brush With Love: New Stories by Jewish Women in Britain* (2004).

These anthologies, as Estévez Saá explained, help to give voice to women writers of short stories from communities that used to silence them and to make the readers aware of the conflicts that they have to face in their own societies. However, Estévez Saá pointed out that this type of publications run the risk of conveying an image of parochialism, of localism, that could make us forget about more universal concerns that are undoubtedly found in short stories by women. This universal appeal is vindicated in a different type of anthologies, such as the interesting *Penguin Book of International Women's Stories*, edited by Kate Figes and published in 1996, in whose introduction Figes vindicates that the writers "all tell tales with universal appeal" (1996: ix), and that the stories are "tiny tastes from a flourishing of new and exciting talent worldwide" (1996: xi).

Another point made by Estévez Saá was that once women writers of short stories in English are fairly represented in anthologies, collections, on-line magazines, etc., the question of their critical reception remains to be solved. Estévez Saá explained that we can still detect occasional attempts at pigeonholing and underestimating them: a clear instance is provided by Adrienne Gavin, in an essay entitled "Living in a World of Make-Believe: Fantasy, Female Identity, and Modern Short Stories by Women in the British Tradition" (121-132), included in the book *Postmodern Approaches to the Short Story*, edited by Farhat Iftekharrudin, Joseph Boyden, Joseph Longo, and Mary Rohrberger (2003), where she maintains that "[F]emale experiences of fantasy are most pervasive in women's writing of the British tradition" (2003: 122) and that there is an "American resistance to adult fantasy literature" (2003: 122). On the other hand, other critics have questioned women's skill at writing short stories precisely because they have detected their apparent bias towards realist narratives and private topics. This is something that Margarita Estévez commented on last year in Huelva in relation to the critical reception of Irish women writers of short stories. This was Nuala O'Faolain's or Eve Patten's attitude in 1985 and 1996, respectively. If we consider, as Adrienne Gavin says, that British women writers tend to fantasy when compared to an assumed American realist preference, we can also remember the above-mentioned work by Lynette Carpenter and Wendy Colmar,

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Haunting the House of Fiction (1991), in which they defend that there are strong affinities between American and British women writers of ghost stories that would distinguish them from their national male counterparts. This way they vindicate not only women's sustained interest in the fantastic realm of ghost story writing but also their allegedly different way of dealing with it when compared to men.

José Manuel Estévez Saá's partial and provisional conclusion, therefore, was that the state of the contemporary short story is a good one, and that women writers, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world, are demonstrating with their contributions that they can serve both the interests and vindications of their native communities, as well as write texts with a more general and universal appeal. He also suggested that, the same as male authors, women are suffering from the progressive disappearance of literary magazines. Their texts are, thus, subject to new modes of distribution of short stories such as the anthology and, he supposed, in a near future, the popularisation of free on-line magazines.

Finally, he reiterated that it is very dangerous to keep on judging women's short stories in gender terms and that some critics are still too prone to allow gender judgments interfere with genre testing.

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