Introduction

What is it that makes a short story short?

Once upon a time, no one thought of asking that question. The cave-dwelling storyteller, as E. M. Forster imagines him, simply told, and if he was lucky and able enough to hold his hearers’ attention, then they might not kill or eat him.¹ It was incident and excitement, anticipation and suspense, and above all the provision of a satisfying ending that characterized the story as it was embedded in oral culture, and as it prevailed in the short printed prose narrative up until the end of the nineteenth century, at which point something changed, and the question was asked: what is it that makes a short story short?

This book introduces the reader to a broad selection of English-language writers who, in one way or another, whether directly or indirectly, have taken up that question and whose work has been decisive in shaping our understanding of what the modern short story is, and what it is capable of. These writers come from diverse places – England, Scotland, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Nigeria and Canada (for reasons of space, authors from the United States of America have been excluded, and interested readers are directed instead to Martin Scofield’s complementary volume in this series, The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story); what connects them to one another can be summed up in the words of the Anglo-Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen: they have understood the ‘shortness’ of the short story to be something more, something other, than ‘non-extension’;² they have treated ‘shortness’, that is to say, as a ‘positive’ quality.

What Bowen was referring to when she made this discrimination in her landmark 1936 introduction to the Faber Book of Modern Short Stories was the change that occurred in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, a change that, as she saw it, signalled the short story’s breaking free from the grip of novel and the novelistic imagination. Up until that point, the short story had been treated as a condensed novel, and the art of writing it lay in the skill with which the author could squeeze the machinery of plot and character into the reduced frame of a few thousand words. The short story was a doll’s house, a fully realized world in miniature. What suddenly occurred to writers
like Henry James, however, was the notion that writing ‘short’ might be less a matter of shrinking the novel into a tiny space than of making more artful and strategic economies, cutting away the kind of material we normally depend upon for narrative continuity and coherence, for example, and working with these tactical omissions to suggest and imply meaning, rather than stating it directly. What James and others saw was that the short story could achieve great richness and complexity – or ‘multiplicity’ to use James’s own word – as a result of, rather than in spite of, its brevity.

James himself, it must be said, was keener to observe such reticence in others’ writing than practise it in his own; nevertheless, the idea of a creative trans-action between brevity and complexity – the art of saying less but meaning more – took hold among the emergent literary avant-garde at the turn into the twentieth century, and as we shall see in Part II, became the basis of modernist experimentation in the short form. Yet this new-found property of the short story was always more than just a matter of form and technique. James had come upon it through his reading of Russian and European writers like Ivan Turgenev and Guy de Maupassant, and, as he recognized at the time, these were authors likely to baffle and perplex the ‘moralists’ among their English readers. In other words, James descried a potential connection between an elliptical, ambiguous, evasive, non-didactic story style and the breakdown of certain cultural and moral certainties.

Many agreed with James, among them G. K. Chesterton, for whom the attraction to short stories was a reflection of the ‘fleetingness and fragility’ of modern existence. Throughout the twentieth century we encounter the idea that the short story form is somehow specially amenable or adaptable to the representation of an increasingly fragmented social character under the conditions of technological, industrial modernity. This is perhaps most in evidence in the modernist period, but contemporary writers too like to claim that the short story is ideally calibrated to the experience of modern life. Here is the South African author Nadine Gordimer, writing in 1968:

Each of us has a thousand lives and a novel gives a character only one. For the sake of the form. The novelist may juggle about with chronology and throw narrative overboard; all the time his characters have the reader by the hand, there is a consistency of relationship throughout the experience that cannot and does not convey the quality of human life, where contact is more like the flash of fire-flies, in and out, now here, now there, in darkness. Short story writers see by the light of the flash; theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of – the present moment. Ideally, they have learned to do without explanation of what went before, and what happens beyond this point.
This is shortness as a ‘positive’ quality, in the sense that the form, handled right, is able to embody an experiential condition of modernity – a sense of chronic uncertainty, historical sequestration and social isolation.

In the classic accounts of the short story – by Bowen, H. E. Bates, and Frank O’Connor – one repeatedly encounters the idea that the short story is somehow ‘up to speed’ with the realities of modern life. Bates, for example, citing Bowen, claims that the form is ‘a child of this century’ in the same way that cinema is. Like film, it conducts narrative not by extended exposition, as the novel does, but ‘by a series of subtly implied gestures, swift shots, moments of suggestion, an art in which elaboration and above all explanation are superfluous and tedious’. In this respect it is the literary form readily adaptable to the experience of modernity and the accelerated pace of life ‘that travels so fast that we even attempt to anticipate it and play at prophets’. It is for this reason too that Bates thinks the short story has played so prominent a part in the literature of America in an age where people are ‘talking faster, moving faster, and apparently thinking faster’.

The idea that American writers have raised the short story to the level of ‘a national art form’ is reiterated by Frank O’Connor in The Lonely Voice, a book that remains for many the landmark work in criticism of the short story. Like Bates, O’Connor considers the short story to be both an essentially ‘modern art’, attuned to ‘modern conditions – to printing, science, and individual religion’, and, in its anti-traditionalist versions, a distinctly literary one that will persist for as long as ‘culture’ survives the onslaught of ‘mass civilization’. The reason for its pre-eminence in the twentieth century, O’Connor argues, is that it manages to embody ‘our own attitude to life’. What that attitude is has something to do with the experience of social dislocation in the modern world – what he calls the ‘intense awareness of human loneliness’. In the short story’s fascination with ‘submerged population groups’, O’Connor sees the reflection of a society ‘that has no sign posts, a society that offers no goals and no answers’.

Whether or not one agrees that the short story is uniquely or specially equipped to do the kind of cultural work that these commentators suppose, it is certainly the case that the form has remained a vital and valid one in the twentieth century, and has served as the medium for much that has been new or innovative in modern fiction. This book is organized in such a way as to reflect both the formal and contextual aspects to the short story’s development and to explore the interactions between them. Each chapter presents close analyses of stories alongside comments writers and critics have made on them, attending both to what is happening in the language, structure and form of the texts, and to the cultural, social and material contexts in which they were produced and to which they contribute. These principles have also dictated the organization.
of the book into four sections. The first of these examines the ‘rise’ of the short story in the nineteenth century and the emergence of a body of critical and creative work that reflects the new ‘literary’ status of the form. Part II deals with the modernist period. In many respects modernism has been, and remains, the short story’s centre of gravity – and not only in academic criticism. For many readers, James Joyce and Katherine Mansfield are the first names that come to mind in any roster of the modern form; and the innovations they introduced, most notably the ‘epiphany’, have assumed the status of first principles for aspiring writers of short fiction, not to mention the professionals who teach them on creative writing courses throughout the English-speaking world. Part III considers the afterlife of modernism, as the form was absorbed into different writing contexts and became a fixture of the academic study of literature. This is the period of classic statements on the story by Bates, Bowen, O’Connor and Sean O’Faolain, in all of which a central concern is how to deal with the legacy of modernism. This is also the period that sees the consolidation of the modernist aesthetic in the values and practices of academic criticism, and the establishment of ‘creative writing’ in the university – both of which contexts are apparent in the work of Angela Carter and Ian McEwan. Part IV enlarges the focus of this book to take in the short story as it has featured in Anglophone literatures from beyond England and Ireland. Once again, it is the relationship between text and context that is the main interest of this section, and in particular the question of why the short story has played such a prominent role – disproportionately so – in cultures that have experienced colonial disruption.
Part I

The nineteenth century
It is a commonplace of short story criticism to assert that English writers were slow taking to the form in the nineteenth century. Where Russian and American authors excelled in the dramatic ‘single-incident’ narrative, the English cultivated, as V. S. Pritchett would later put it, a ‘national taste for the ruminative and disquisitional’: ‘we preferred to graze on the large acreage of the novel and even tales by Dickens or Thackeray or Mrs Gaskell strike us as being unused chapters of longer works’;¹ Among commentators of the time one finds a good deal of support for Pritchett’s claim, not least from Henry James who, in an essay on the French writer Guy de Maupassant, suggested that the English preferred their fiction ‘rather by the volume than by the page’.² It was not until the last two decades of the nineteenth century, as the novel began to lose command of the literary marketplace and the periodical publishing industry began to boom, that circumstances were finally propitious to the development of the short story.

To a great extent, the ‘rise’, albeit belated, of the form in England had to do with commercial factors. The 1880s and 1890s saw the dramatic expansion of a magazine market that had been growing exponentially since the 1840s. Improved technologies in printing, such as machine-made paper and halftone illustrations, the repeal of mid-Victorian free-trade duties on paper and changes in copyright law had all conspired to make periodical publishing one of the most accessible and lucrative sectors of the modern economy. Book publishers such as George Smith and Macmillan quickly got involved, launching their own story-based journals as low-capital testing grounds for fresh talent and a ready means of securing new writers for their lists. Meanwhile, the gathering pace of periodicals – monthlies, weeklies, dailies, evening dailies – meant a vast increase in demand for material that was as easy for the jobbing writer to produce as it was for the time-pressed commuter to consume. Penny-press titles like Alfred Harmsworth’s Answers began to favour stand-alone stories over serialized fiction, while George Newnes’s hugely successful Tit-Bits (the model for Harmsworth’s journal) and his Strand Magazine ran short story competitions and provided instruction to their readers in how to write winning submissions.
By 1891 penny and six-penny journals alike were no longer carrying serialized novels at all but were instead publishing an original short story by a distinguished writer in every number. According to the historian Peter Keating, it is unlikely that the short story would have developed much at all in this period ‘if the market had not been so desperate to fill periodicals columns with fiction’. As Henry James put it at the time, ‘Periodical literature is a huge open mouth which has to be fed – a vessel of immense capacity which has to be filled’.

The ‘rise’ of the short story also brought with it a new interest in the internal workings of the form. In commentary by James, Frederick Wedmore and Brander Matthews, among many others, we see developing the idea that the ‘shortness’ of the short story might be conceived of as, in Elizabeth Bowen’s suggestive phrase, a ‘positive’ quality, rather than a matter merely of ‘non-extension’. Whereas for Dickens and Mrs Gaskell the short story had been little more than a highly condensed novel, not governed by any aesthetic principles of its own, later Victorian authors began to think more strategically about the art of writing ‘short’. Instead of shrinking down novelistic tropes and conventions, they experimented with more artful methods of omission, compression, aperture and ellipsis. Out went traditional methods of plotting and characterization, and in came a new roster of narrative concepts: implication, ambiguity, suggestion, dilation and, above all, plotlessness.

More thoroughly than any critic of the time, it was Henry James who explored the art of writing short (though it has to be said that James’s own stories did not much reflect his thinking on this matter). The short story, he told his English readers, was less a matter of condensing some preconfigured narrative unit to fit a lesser word count, as the mid-Victorian novelist had thought, than of learning to manage without the orientational structures of plot and exposition on which the novel was based. For instruction in the matter he looked abroad – to Maupassant, of course, but also to the Russian writer Ivan Turgenev, for whom, James said, ‘the germ of a story . . . was never an affair of plot – that was the last thing he thought of: it was the representation of certain persons . . . The thing consists of the motions of a group of selected creatures, which are not the result of a preconceived action, but a consequence of the qualities of the actions’. James’s choice of the word ‘motions’ indicates a quality of action without definable consequence, ‘purposiveness’ without purpose, where brevity takes the form of a suggestive and implicatory method of characterization and a marked de-emphasis of plot. In his preface to ‘The Lesson of the Master’, James described the ideal short story in similar terms, as the form in which one might ‘do the complicated thing with a strong brevity and lucidity – to arrive, on behalf of the multiplicity, at a certain science of
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control’. Of essence was the idea that a disparity of extent could emerge between utterance and meaning: though material statement be curtailed, diversity and complexity of sense need not. Where in the past the short story had been governed by action and incident, providing ‘adventure[s] comparatively safe, in which you [had], for the most part, but to put one foot after the other’, the new ‘plotless’ form dealt in ‘exposures’ and ‘glimpses’, creating the ‘impression . . . of a complexity or a continuity’. It was the ‘rarer performance’ and made ‘the best of the sport’ by being ‘as far removed as possible from the snap of the pistol-shot’. It was also the form that quickened the literary sensibility by revealing that ‘liberal more’ of which the short story was capable.

Other critics picked up on James’s idea that ‘plotlessness’ was a marker of literariness, and that this was what distinguished the short story proper from the mass-market popular tale. The ‘plotless’ form, Frederick Wedmore argued, ‘with its omissions’ and ‘the brevity of its allusiveness’, was beyond the grasp of the common consumer schooled in the ‘convenient inexactness’ of the Victorian story; rather, it needed to be ‘met half way’ by the ‘alert, not the fatigued, reader’. The proper home of the short story, therefore, was the highbrow literary magazine where its art could be practised ‘upon exalted lines’ and the writer freed of the burden of ‘appealing to, at all events of having to give sops to, at one and the same moment, gallery and stalls’. Only in so discerning a venue could the ‘true’ short story thrive, ‘not as a ready means of hitting the big public, but as a medium for the exercise of the finer art – as a medium, moreover, adapted peculiarly to that alert intelligence, on the part of the reader, which rebels sometimes at the longueurs of the conventional novel’.

A similar blend of aesthetics, economics, and reception sociography features, in more anguished form, in G. K. Chesterton’s reading of turn-of-the-century literary culture. Looking back on the career of Charles Dickens, Chesterton explained the contemporary taste for the short story by way of contrast with the high-Victorian era of the great and heroic novelist:

Our modern attraction to short stories is not an accident of form; it is the sign of a real sense of fleetingness and fragility; it means that existence is only an impression, and, perhaps, only an illusion. A short story of to-day has the air of a dream; it has the irrevocable beauty of a falsehood; we get a glimpse of grey streets of London or red plains of India, as in an opium vision; we see people – arresting people with fiery and appealing faces. But when the story is ended, the people are ended. We have no instinct of anything ultimate and enduring behind the episodes. The moderns, in a word, describe life in short stories because they are possessed with the sentiment that life itself is an uncommonly short story, and perhaps not a true one.
That sense of ‘fleetingness and fragility’ contrasted for Chesterton with the mid-Victorian period of progress and hope and, of course, of the three-decker novel. His imagery recalls Walter Pater’s conclusion to *The Renaissance*: not only is modern experience fissiparous, formed of tenuous, infinitely divisible impressions, but we are each confined within our own perceptual ambit. What was lacking in this condition, Chesterton lamented, was the continuity of vision, the faith in public knowledge, the assurance of certain certainties that permitted the Victorian novelist’s art. And the destruction of these values was directly expressed in literary form, as a retreat into smallness and ‘minor’ style.

Chesterton saddles the slight frame of the short story with a great deal of moral and circumstantial lumber here, but he voices assumptions and anxieties that lay embedded in the comments of many of his contemporaries. For James, Wedmore and others, fretful encounters with publishers and with the rapidly fragmenting marketplace for fiction triggered worries about literary value and status and, in particular, the composition of the contemporary readership, anxieties that intersected with broader cultural and social controversies in the 1890s around mass education and the spread of literacy, the effects of democratization and the impact of technological change and urbanization. By conceiving of the short story as a ‘finer art’, beyond the comprehension and consumption habits of the ‘big public’, James and his fellows drew the form directly into these debates.

As we shall see later, this positioning of the short story as a ‘literary’ as opposed to a ‘popular’ fictional form would pave the way for its absorption into modernism in the early decades of the twentieth century; but more of that in Part II. For now, the chapters in this section trace three distinct stages in the short story’s development during the Victorian era. The first looks at Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy and shows how both writers reserved the short story, or the ‘tale’ more properly, for treating material of a supernatural or sensational nature, drawing heavily on the traditions of oral folk culture. Chapter 2 moves forward to the 1890s and the work of Rudyard Kipling and Joseph Conrad, both of whom exploited the conventions of the popular magazine story while at the same time experimenting with enigmatic and frequently ironic narrative structures. Chapter 3 examines the circle of writers associated with John Lane and Henry Harland’s notorious decadent journal *The Yellow Book*, among them Hubert Crackanthorpe and George Egerton. This chapter shows how the new ‘plotless’ form became associated with avant-garde literary values, and by extension with the radical cultural criticism of the ‘New Woman’ feminists.
Chapter 1

Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy

In his apologetic preface to the 1852 edition of *Christmas Stories*, Charles Dickens remarked on how much harder he found it writing short stories than long ones:

The narrow space within which it was necessary to confine these Christmas Stories when they were originally published, rendered their construction a matter of some difficulty, and almost necessitated what is peculiar in their machinery. I could not attempt great elaboration of detail, in the working out of character within such limits, believing that it could not succeed.¹

While he recognized that condensed narrative forms ‘necessitated’ a different approach from longer fiction, Dickens was unable to think of this as other than a ‘confining’ or ‘limiting’ of his full expressive capacity; that short stories did not allow him to individuate character through ‘great elaboration of detail’ was a privation rather than a stimulus to a new concept of characterization. The impression Dickens gives here, as throughout his career as a short story writer, is of a master builder labouring to construct a doll’s house from the plans to a mansion.

Like most of his English contemporaries, Dickens considered the ‘shortness’ of the short story to be a matter largely of length. What defined the form was, simply, that it contained fewer words than a novel, not that it did anything the novel didn’t, or couldn’t, do. To invoke Elizabeth Bowen again, ‘shortness’ was not regarded as a ‘positive’ quality; it was at best a hindrance, a technical obstacle to the exercise of one’s full expressive capacity. Early in his career, Dickens tended to compose short stories as parts of larger projects, or as fillers for spare pages in the serial instalments of his novels. *Pickwick Papers* (1836–7), for example, contains nine ‘inset’ tales within its narrative framework, while two stand-alone stories, ‘The Baron of Grozgwig’ and ‘The Five Sisters of York’, feature in chapter 6 of *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–9). H. E. Bates, in his classic study of the short story in English, suggests that these novelistic preoccupations caused Dickens to ‘underestimate the reader’, a flaw that is lethal to success in