

THE 200 GENRES OF THE SHORT STORY

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In "Prolegomenon to a Generic Study of the Short Story" Charles E. May presents "a unified theory of the short story" (1996:471). Such a theory would deserve to have added to it a unified theory of short story sub-genres. For the concept of "unified theory" may suggest that varieties of story invite varieties of theory, and indeed, differences between types of story can be as revealing as their similarities. A detective story, for instance, is usually of the *analytic type*: the action goes backward, as it were, in that the reader is enlightened at the end of the story about what happened earlier on. An initiation story, on the other hand, tends to have a *synthetic structure*: an inexperienced narrator is involved in a situation which leads to some kind of crisis or climax—that, at least, is a working hypothesis, which can lead to insights into the way the author ladles out information. The work of interpretation, then, is supported by the assumption that detailed criticism presupposes a variety of sub-genres, and that it is helpful to think of the detective story and the initiation story as belonging to different genres. This assumption certainly allows us to design a variety of search-engines, the dyad *analytic vs. synthetic* structure being simply an example of the kind of differentiations which are likely to be more helpful than is a "unified theory".

The analytic/synthetic binary, of course, is only one example of how we can differentiate between different forms of narrative. There are a number of other approaches which have the notable advantage that we can apply them to any or all

of the next hundred stories we care to examine. One of them involves a more detailed fanning out of short story types and sub-genres, since a rich menu of sub-genres will presumably be a useful aid to criticism. It is also an approach that works in teaching: it impels the students both to expand their diet of reading and to find creative ways of identifying similarities and differences.

An example: the classical detective story of the Sherlock Holmes kind requires a "Watson". The Watson is a kind of booby to whom the detective explains what has happened or might have happened. The story of initiation, on the other hand, tends to do without a Watson: the adolescent is left alone in his puzzlement. This is as it should be: for in the initiation story, the reader tends to be superior to the character in terms of insight. In a "who-dunnit", by contrast, the reader's state of knowledge tends to be —indeed, has to be— inferior to that of the detective; otherwise the element of suspense is foregone. Like the analytic/synthetic binary, the superior/inferior position of the reader is a question of narrative technique as well as sub-genre. It has the great advantage that it constitutes the kind of key question which we can then put to the next dozen stories we encounter, and that the answers are likely to be of a kind which the run-of-the-mill student paraphrase of a work of fiction will not normally reveal.

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We can therefore conclude that if it is true, as Charles May argues, that the "short story demands a formal generic theory that should be judged on its explanatory power" (1996: 464), a theory of sub-genres, as I have argued elsewhere (1982), will have, in addition to an explanatory power, an exploratory power as well. This is especially so because the most interesting authors seem to see genre rules as invitations to strike out in hitherto unknown and thus unexpected directions. The recognition of genre rules is often an invitation to transgress and break fresh ground.

In what follows, unfortunately, no unified "formal generic theory" can be presented, except for a useful first step: most of the sub-genres (though not all) can be classified according to the centrality of *person*, *place*, *theme* and *time* (Bonheim 1982: 168f.). This is a kind of formal generic division which can help us to collect stories of similar shapes and formulate some general statements, on the basis of which we can move on to a more systematic analysis of any particular story. If, for instance, the detective story tends to present a result, for instance a murder, before explaining how and why the murder came about, we have a useful thesis, namely that almost inevitably this genre employs an analytic rather than a synthetic time structure, but also with embedded synthetic elements. This thesis gives us a basis for investigation: we can try to see how this rule is followed, played with or, on occasion, violated.

Of course the writer can take the "rules" which scholars formulate as challenges, as invitations to invent deviations and perhaps violations of accepted conventions.

The "pluralistic approach to genre" favoured by Charles May can therefore be usefully fanned out into a "pluralism plus" —that is, a recognition that when we look closely at any particular short story, it is possible to gain unexpected insights by spotting diversions, exceptions and downright innovations. This is a game in which novices in the game of criticism as well as experts can engage. At the outset it is helpful to assign a story to a sub-category or sub-genre such as the Western or the story of life in the colonies, but perhaps also to a category such as *analytic* or *synthetic* —thus taking into consideration technique as well as content. The potential flood of sub-genres can be reduced with reference to any particular story by considering the special generic qualities of the story at hand. The *dramatis personae* provides common factors, for instance: astronaut, evil antagonist and girl Friday for the story of outer space; sleuth, client and criminal for the detective story; cowboy, rancher, and a few goodies and baddies for the Western.

Knowing the genre or subgenre, then, we can proceed to further analysis and also to critical judgement: is the work merely a humdrum repetition of familiar elements (plot, time scale, cast of characters), or does it ring changes on the conventions? Does it present innovative twists and angles? The genre term may also generate further questions not only concerning plot and character but also theme, setting, time scale, crisis point, beginning and ending, stylistic features, etc. Some genre terms will be seen to refer to earlier forms, like the tale or the romance, others to specific characters, such as cowboys, doctors or lovers. Thematic groupings like war stories or stories of initiation are also popular, and bookshop favourites focus on American as opposed to British or Canadian, Irish or Scottish stories, some of which have been continuously in print for decades. Recently European scholars have come to teach the story of colonial life or stories written by or about ethnic minorities as a genre in itself.¹

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In the last half-century the emphasis has been increasingly placed on technique as well as content, and a set of texts can be grouped according to their features of technique. Thus there is a widespread interest in varieties of atmosphere, point-of-view technique and special forms (like speech delivered to a silent listener, of which Hawthorne's "A Rill from a Town Pump" and Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" are early examples), the therapeutic confession² or the story told in the second-person.³ Stories with surprise endings (the so-called twist in the tail) seem to have a special appeal to younger readers. Other forms include science fiction, stories of life in other worlds. Further (perhaps obvious) groupings, like stories of love and marriage, turn out to be more of less "empty sets"; even F. Scott Fitzgerald's definition of the short story (boy meets girl, they fall in love, they marry, etc.) is almost impossible to support with examples: a survey of the most widely sold anthologies for use in universities yields hardly a single example of what Fitzgerald claimed to be the phenotype of the genre.⁴ More common are narrative plays like

the intrusion of a stranger and stylistic diversions including dialect, the total reliance on dialogue, inner monologue etc.

Thus far these groupings seem to have evolved by chance, be it as publication ventures or collections of texts claiming to be suitable for teaching literature. The question arises as to whether a concerted analysis of short story collections could not unearth further genres which have hitherto escaped notice: after all, the genre terms mentioned thus far seem to have grown like Topsy, not by a systematic survey of texts or by canvassing critical readers.

On the assumption that the genres have in fact emerged by chance rather than through scholarly analysis, students taking part in a University of Cologne seminar were asked to write down half a dozen short story types that they had not see labelled. Since the seminar was both popular and populous, the lists returned to the seminar leader were rich beyond expectation. Naturally there were duplications in the list (like "the story of married life", of which only O. Henry's "Gift of the Magi", Updike's "Wife Wooing" and Romesh Guniesekera's "Batik" were known to the students). These duplications were removed for the purposes of the following account. Nevertheless, the feedback proved to be quite overwhelming, for the resulting master list included well over 200 entries, weeded down here to the round number of 200 and arranged in alphabetical order:

Short Story Genres

academic
 action story
 adventure
 anecdotal
 animal
 anti-romantic
 anti-war
 artist (James)
 "Beziehungskiste" (Maugham...) [story of special relationship]
 chaos-theory-based
 character
 child
 Christian
 class-crash stories
 closed ending
 colonial life
 comic
 conflict of generations
 courage, cowardice

cowboy
 crime stories
 culture conflict (Bartleby, Country of the Blind, Force of Circumstance, Outpost of Progress)
 death-ending (11 out of 31 in the Penguin Anthologies of English Stories)
 dialogue
 dubbio (16th c. Italian form, ending with question to reader)
 e-mail story
 environment-focussed
 epiphany-centred
 essayistic
 event story
 exotic climes story
 experimental
 expository
 expositionless
 fable
 family relations story
 figures of testimony-centred
 first-person story
 folk tale-influenced (vs. legend)
 fundamentalism theme
 futuristic
 fuzzy set (as to character, theme...)
Games People Play (Eric Berne's theory of human relationships)
 genre focus: person, place, time; style, technique, topic etc.
 gerontological story
 ghost story
 Gothic tale
 he-didn't-look-back story
 horror story
 hunting
 I saw the world wrong (Bierce, Joyce, Kureishi, Powys, Spark, Wells)
 ideological
 idyllic
 impressionistic
 initiation ("After the Show", "The Battler", "Death in the Woods"...)
 injustice
 insight (vs. atmosphere)-orientated
 intrusive stranger/visitor

learning/teaching
 legend
 local color
 Lotmanesque non-event [focus not on physical but mental event]
 love
 lower class culture story
 Märchen
 madness
 mad scientist
 man-animal story
 man-machine topic
 manual labor story
 marriage-ended story
 media theme
 mental aberration, mental deficiency
 milieu story
 mind trip (Joyce Cary, Irving, Melville...)
 minimalist
 mirror walking down a roadway narrative
 miscegenation, story of (Kipling, Maugham...)
 misinterpretable
 mistress-concealed story
 misunderstandable
 modernist
 monologue
 moral-ending story
 morality theme story
 multicultural (Conrad, Dickens, Joyce, Kipling, Lawrence, Maugham, Wells, Malamud)
 mysterious stranger
 narrated monologue (erlebte Rede)
 narrated time = narrative time
 narratorial perspective: inferior/superior/or level with characters
 naturalistic
 non-expositional
 non-quotidian
 non-resolution story
 Novella
 observer's blindness story (Huxley, Joyce, Powys, Wells...)
 one person

open ending
 other worlds
 parergonality
 partner story
 patchwork narrative
 peace story
 philosophical
 picturesque
 place-centred
 plotless
 political
 postmodernist
 premodernist
 prison
 psychohistorical (rare!: Goodman Brown...)
 quandary
 quotidian
 reader-distant (in terms of culture, class, epoch, history, sex...)
 realistic
 relationship story ("Beziehungskiste")
 religious
 resource exchange story
 revelation
 revenge
 rethorical
 romantic
 rural
 sibling rivalry
 single incident
 sketch
 slice of life
 snapper
 snap-shot story
 social outsider story
 sports-theme
 spy story
 stories of
 academia
 atmosphere
 bravado, courage, derring-do

destiny
 generation conflict
 politics
 racism
 resolution (vs. story of revelation)
 revelation (as opposed to development)
 revenge
 supernatural
 stream of consciousness
 stylish
 style-centred (Joyce, Mansfield, Updike, Woolf...)
sup, *sad*, and *sin* stories [in the theory of Wilhelm Fieger, a matter of perspective:
 the narrator has a position either *superior*, on a line with (situationally adequate
 = *sad*) or situationally inferior (*sin*) relative to the fictive characters and events]
 superstition
 surprise ending
 telephone story
 tennis court infatuation story
 tone (story of tone rather than event)
 tranche de vie
 twist-in-the-tail (Joseph Conrad's "Outpost of Progress", Somerset Maugham's
 "Force of Circumstance", H.G. Wells' "The Country of the Blind", James
 Joyce's "The Dead", D.H. Lawrence's "Fanny and Annie", Joyce Cary's "The
 Breakout", Aldous Huxley's "The Gioconda Smile", Evelyn Waugh's "Mr
 Loveday's Little Outing", Angus Wilson's "Raspberry Jam"...)

utopian
 vampire
 venue-centred (rather than character or event-centred)
 vignette
 violence
 war story
 well-made
 writer-as-ventriloquist
 zoological

Many of these labels are of course debatable. But for the most part they can justifiably be attached to one or more works. The students whose labels were questioned tended to defend their choices, claiming that though debatable, their genre-labels had explanatory value. That is, the label identified central aspects of one or more of the stories they had read, aspects which might have been missed if they had not been pinpointed by the label. It is hard to say whether this advantage was

"true", but if it was subjectively felt to help the student come to grips with a work which was at the outset simply "a good read", about which no more could or needed to be said, the genre-label was at least a door into a discussion of significant details: character, plot, time structure, stylistic levels and the like.

The assumption seems to be that a literary genre is a kind of container into which authors pour alternative contents: every genre is represented by at least one story, and the story has a specific set of characters, themes, plots, techniques, more or less moulded by the container. As one student put it, "that is what we mean by form". Thus the container is thought to have a potential for "engendering" works suitable to its shape, the writer's version of a kitchen implement, like a cookie-cutter with which an undifferentiated mass of dough is given a certain size and configuration. Presumably, once an author has thought up such a container, other authors follow and are inspired to find other kinds of filling, like characters, plots, settings, motifs, narrative techniques etc.

Obviously the "direction of fit" is not the same for the short story as for an older genre like the sonnet or the novel. It is thought, at least, that the latter forms existed before the container had been consciously recognized, labelled and approved. Some of the German Romanticists and, in their wake, Washington Irving, for instance, wrote works that look to us rather like short stories before Poe had so-to-speak "invented" the genre. Once the genre was there, it entered the consciousness of potential practitioners and took on a variety of functions: first, to help authors produce works of various kinds, then to allow readers to specify what kind of goods they wanted more of, later on to help critics group the works they found interesting, that is, to compare and contrast and analyse them in a more or less systematic fashion. Thus a group of similar works seem to belong together in one container: recognizing the container, the reader can better interpret and criticize its contents.

Our students found the identification of such containers to be satisfying for a number of reasons, not all of which could be clearly stated. First of all, an amateur critic has to look for things to say about a work, and even naming the author and the date of publication is felt to be a kind of explanation, that is, of incipient criticism. Then the genre, such as Western or detective story, is named and felt to be a helpful tool, and elements of these genres, like typical characters, events, time structures, styles etc. are identified. The question of whether these elements have explanatory value or not is not put. What seems to succeed is a kind of "hands-on" approach in which all labels are felt to be handholds with which the work can be grasped, including the first-person story, the who-dunnit etc. The professional critic will always be asking whether such terms help illuminate our reading or lead to a better interpretation, but for the amateur critic, the label itself is better than nothing.

What really enlivened the matching of particular works to the genres to which they seemed to belong was the invention of genres, for which no particular work was an example: students identified imagined containers for which they were not able immediately to identify suitable contents. One student, for instance, invented "the story of the mad engineer", and other students were quite delighted with the idea, although we were unable to identify an example. The genre concept, in other words, is a kind of container without a known filling—an "empty set" in the jargon of set theory. One of the students proceeded to write a story which fitted (or so he claimed) the "mad engineer" container. This is taking the idea of the "genre" at face value: a womb designed to bring forth progeny of a kind not previously identified. We may ask if this is in any sense what we mean by literary criticism, but the fact is that the students involved felt inspired to reclassify some of the works they had read and to connect their elements, such as types of character, actions, speech events, time sequences, etc., with large groupings of works—which is surely what professional critics take to be genres: not models which "engender" particular works but rather as "large baggy monsters" (the Henry James image of the novel)—and thus to construct their own, admittedly *ad hoc* and amateurish system of criticism. Its advantages were soon evident: on the one hand one has to analyse and marshal significant elements, on the other to pass an over-all judgement. In other words, analysis alone was not the goal, but a moving on to some kind of synthesis. And what else is the professional view of genres other than a set of "baggy monsters" which allow us to differentiate work A from work B and also to see what A, B and C have in common? "Compare and contrast" is a tried and true form of criticism.

Since the list of genres seemed to some of the participants so long that it was impressive but also useless, a number of hypotheses were thought to be more interesting than the list itself. These included the following:

1. The current terms for short fiction genres, such as detective story, love story etc. are merely notional. They are in no sense complete.
2. A few standard terms (like "love story") have been generated as it were by happenstance in the Anglo-American literary culture, and are relatively uninteresting. It is also surprisingly difficult to find salient examples: all students can name detective stories, but few can think of a single love story, and indeed, the four anthologies we used offered no more than two examples.
3. Some of the genres seem fit for barber-shop magazines rather than serious consideration. Again, the "love-story" is an example: anthologies intended for academic use, at any rate, rarely include them, except for some classics such as Hardy's "The Distracted Preacher".
4. Some of the newly minted terms seemed more useful than the familiar ones, although this might entail the problem that technical terms require explanation:

the label alone is not enough if a theory is involved which is familiar in some academic cultures but not in others. In the major European countries, locally generated theories may become popular without gaining a foothold in the consciousness of a neighbouring academic culture. The Lotmanesque concept of the "event", for instance, is familiar to Russian scholars, but apparently unknown in Italy or England: for four students, the Lotman view that an event is a move from one state to another (like falling in love or discovering who dunnit) was felt to be revelatory and highly—that is, repeatedly—useful.

5. The addition of further genre terms was felt to be not only legitimate but also a potentially helpful enlargement of the critical tool-chest: the assumption is that a genre label is a kind of lever that opens the lid of a story and helps us to look inside.
6. A number of terms, such as "detective story" and "mystery story", suggest a subset of sections or subnarratives, and these almost inevitably have analytical rather than synthetic structure. That is, the progress of the story is actually a regress: it goes backwards in narrated time, tending to end in a revelation of what happened prior to the beginning of the story. Thus the genre label ("analytic" rather than "synthetic" narrative) puts into the critic's hands an instrument of analysis which can then be applied to most stories under scrutiny, not only to detective and crime fiction, and is thus a universally useful tool.
7. Some genre labels are nonce-forms; that is, we can name two or three stories with a gerontological theme, but cannot see that the genre deserves further expansion. In some cases the students could find only a single example—is the term genre suitable, then? Can a "category" consist of a single example? That sounds like a *contradictio in adiecto*. And even if the answer is "yes", is a category with no second example of any use? On the other hand, the example of the "story of the mad engineer" suggested that we cannot legislate against an "empty set". Once the set is there, a writer may well try to fill it with an example or two.
8. Most of the genre terms, including the "gerontological story", seem to have no explanatory value. They simply offer a label to tell us what it is about. Other genre terms, by contrast, help us review and see more in some of the stories we already know: stories of resolution and stories of revelation seem to be basic types, differently constructed. Most stories are one or the other. The two terms, in other words, have a heuristic function for almost any story we may come across. Thus the Lotman-story was given special attention: it posits that the modern short story tends not to depend on a physical action but on the crossing of a semantic boundary, like the move from indifference to love or blindness to insight—stories of adolescence tend to have this structure. The central "event" is not necessarily named in the story, but merely suggested, but

may nevertheless be of absolutely central importance. The Lotman-parameter can be applied to almost every story worth its salt. As often as not it reveals an essential quality to which we may initially have been blind. Students who thought it was good to differentiate between a happy ending and a sad ending saw the error of their ways, realizing that the quality that is "interesting" for a critic is one with which one can "do" something, that is, not only name it but consider its motives, consequences, varieties etc.

9. The best genre labels, then, may well not be the exotic ones, but rather those which repeatedly lead us to see a story in a new and illuminating way. It was opined that about 30 of the 200 labels promised to have a revelatory function, and repeatedly so; but a consensus about which of the other 170 "genres" were expendable could not be reached, at least, not in the time available.

It became clear that the exercise of matching genre labels to relevant stories led to better interpretations and deeper insights in some cases, but proved irrelevant in others. What the participants agreed on, however, was that the conventional set of genre terms is downright misleading. In effect, the match between the wealth of works which are worth reading and analysing and the constricted set of genre labels in circulation is unsatisfactory: it stultifies rather than enriches critical analysis and interpretation. Of what use is it to say that work A is a love story and work B a war story? The present repertoire of genre terms seems to have grown like Topsy, and remains a crude mechanism that singles out a few salient qualities of short fiction, remaining blind to a wealth of other qualities which have not been dreamt of in our critical philosophy.

Notes

1. See Korte and Sternberg (1997).
2. See Zimmermann's "Das Therapiegespräch" (1994).
3. See my article "Narration in the Second Person" (1983).
4. In Europe these tend to be the Penguin anthologies, including two devoted to English and one to American stories, as well as Malcolm Bradbury's *Modern British Short Stories* and possibly a sprinkling of Scottish, Irish, Canadian as well as English-language works from Africa and Australia.

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