THE GENRE OF THE SHORT STORY IN MODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE (LATE XX – EARLY XXI CENTURY)

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Abstract: The article considers the development of the short story in British literature from the 1970s to the first decade of the twenty-first century. Long regarded as a minor form overshadowed by the novel, the short story in this period shows signs of renewed vitality and formal inventiveness. The study aims to describe the main tendencies that shaped the genre and to explain how they changed its poetics. The material includes collections by A. Carter, I. McEwan, A. Smith, J. Barnes and K. Ishiguro. Using comparative, structural and narratological analysis, five tendencies are singled out: the rewriting of inherited plots, the weakening of the traditional epiphany in favour of the open ending, experiments with narrative voice, the cyclisation of collections, and the move towards extreme brevity. It is argued that, rather than dissolving into the novel, the modern short story defines itself more sharply through its own limits.

Keywords: short story, modern English literature, genre, postmodernism, open ending, epiphany, short story cycle, metafiction, flash fiction.

For a long time the short story occupied an uneasy place in British literary life. Publishers tended to treat a collection of stories as a risk, critics often read it as an apprenticeship before "the real thing", and the reading public was assumed to prefer the novel. Yet the decades on either side of the millennium give a rather different picture. Writers of the first rank continued to publish collections, new prizes and anthologies appeared, and the form itself became a place for some of the boldest experiments in English prose. The short story did not simply survive; it changed its methods and, in some respects, its self-understanding.

The relevance of the topic is connected with the fact that the modern English short story is still described mainly through the categories inherited from its classic and modernist phases – unity of effect, the single incident, the moment of revelation. These categories remain useful, but they no longer cover everything the form does. The aim of this work is to identify the leading tendencies in the development of the English short story in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and to show how they affect its poetics. To reach this aim, the following tasks were set: to outline the theoretical views on the genre; to analyse representative collections of the period; to group the observed changes into tendencies; and to evaluate their significance for the genre as a whole.

Theoretical thinking about the short story usually begins with E. A. Poe, who in his review of N. Hawthorne's tales insisted that every element of a brief prose narrative should work towards a single, preconceived effect [5]. This principle explains the compactness of the classic story, but later scholars stressed other features. F. O'Connor connected the form with the experience of lonely, marginal individuals, those he called a "submerged population" [4]. C. E. May treats the short story as closer than the novel to older mythic and lyric modes of narration, oriented towards a significant moment rather than towards the extended chronicle of a life [2]. D. Head, examining the modernist story, shows how writers such as J. Joyce and K. Mansfield turned ambiguity and indirection into structural principles [3]. A. Hunter, tracing the history of the form in English, emphasises that the modernist legacy – especially the

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technique of epiphany – remained a point of reference for later authors, who either developed it or argued with it [1]. For the postmodern period, L. Hutcheon's description of parody as repetition with critical difference proves particularly productive [6]. Recent collective studies edited by A.-M. Einhaus and by C. A. Malcolm and D. Malcolm survey the British and Irish story of this time and confirm its variety [7; 8].

The material of the research consists of five collections chosen to represent different decades and different artistic positions: A. Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" (1979) [9], I. McEwan's "First Love, Last Rites" (1975) [10], A. Smith's "The Whole Story and Other Stories" (2003) [11], J. Barnes's "The Lemon Table" (2004) [12] and K. Ishiguro's "Nocturnes" (2009) [13]. The methods applied are close reading, comparative analysis, structural analysis of plot and composition, and elements of narratological analysis concerned with the narrator and point of view.

The analysis allowed us to distinguish five tendencies that characterise the genre in this period.

1. Rewriting of inherited plots. A significant part of the period's short fiction is built on a recognisable earlier text. A. Carter's collection is the clearest example: the title story returns to C. Perrault's "Bluebeard", but gives the narrative to the young bride herself and lets her be rescued not by her brothers but by her own mother. "The Company of Wolves" reworks the tale of Little Red Riding Hood in a similar manner. The familiar plot is not decoration: the reader's knowledge of the source becomes part of the meaning, and every deviation from it is felt as a comment on the values the old tale carried. This is close to what Hutcheon describes as parody with critical distance [6].

2. The weakening of the epiphany and the open ending. The modernist story often closed with a moment of insight in which the hero, and with him the reader, suddenly understood the situation. In many later stories this moment is withheld, displaced or made deliberately unreliable. I. McEwan's early stories present disturbing, often taboo events in a calm, almost neutral voice and stop without moral resolution, leaving the reader to deal with the effect alone. In J. Barnes's stories the endings are quieter but no less open: a character arrives not at clarity but at a sharper awareness of what cannot be known or changed. The story thus moves the work of interpretation from the text to the reader.

3. Experiments with narrative voice. The short form, being less costly to the writer than a novel, proved to be a convenient space for testing narrative techniques. A. Smith's stories address the reader directly, shift between persons and openly reflect on the process of storytelling. "The Universal Story", for example, keeps beginning again with a new "there was once", so that the reader watches a story searching for its own subject. Metafictional play of this kind does not destroy the emotional effect; rather, it makes the act of telling part of what the story is about.

4. Cyclisation of the collection. Increasingly, the collection is designed as a unified whole rather than a random gathering of pieces. J. Barnes's "The Lemon Table" brings together eleven stories all concerned with ageing and the approach of death; the title itself refers to a table at which, as one story explains, talk of death was permitted. K. Ishiguro's "Nocturnes" goes further: its five stories are connected by music, by evening settings and by a character from the opening story who reappears later in the book. Such a short story cycle occupies an intermediate position between the separate story and the novel, preserving the autonomy of each text while producing additional meaning through their combination.

5. Compression and new channels of circulation. At the turn of the century the tendency towards brevity reached its extreme form in very short fiction, known as "sudden" or "flash" fiction, which entered the critical vocabulary through anthologies of the 1980s [14]. In Britain the spread of such texts was supported by radio readings, literary magazines, online publication and the appearance of special

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awards, among them the BBC National Short Story Award, founded in the mid-2000s. The extreme compression of these texts makes every word, title and gap carry more weight than in a conventional story.

The tendencies described above are not isolated from one another. Rewriting, the open ending and metafictional play all increase the role of the reader, whose knowledge, attention and willingness to complete the text become conditions of its meaning. In this respect the modern short story continues a line begun by the modernists, while radicalising it. At the same time, the cyclisation of collections shows that writers seek ways of compensating for the limited length of a single story without giving up the form. Contrary to the opinion that the short story either imitates the novel or serves as preparation for it, the material shows that the genre has strengthened its specific features – concentration, suggestion, and the significance of what is left unsaid.

The limitation of the present research lies in the restricted number of authors examined; the conclusions need to be tested on a wider range of texts, including the work of writers from Ireland, Scotland and the Commonwealth.

Thus, the English short story of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries can be characterised as a genre in active development rather than in decline. Its main tendencies are the creative rewriting of earlier texts, the replacement of the closing epiphany by an open ending, experiments with narrative voice, the formation of unified story cycles, and a movement towards maximum brevity. Together they make the modern short story a laboratory of narrative forms and give the reader a more active role in the creation of meaning

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