The Short-Short Story: a New Literary Genre

by

José Flávio Nogueira Guimarães

Submitted to the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras: Estudos Literários in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Mestre em Letras: Estudos Literários

Area: Literatures in English

Thesis Adviser: Prof. Thomas LaBorie Burns, PhD

Faculdade de Letras
Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais
Belo Horizonte
2010

Acknowledgements

To G-d with a pinch of faith, in the Jewish manner, my fear and appreciation.

Above all, to Lázaro e Eneida, my parents, people whom I love the most in this world, all my gratitude for believing in me and giving, at least seemingly, unconditionally.

To Felipe Araujo, my partner, my thankful heart for the steadfast support and companionship.

I owe much to my adviser, Professor Thomas LaBorie Burns. His correct attitude and encouragement made all the difference.

I am likewise grateful to all my teachers from the MA program for the good-will to teach and help.

I also thank the Pós-lit and Secretaria de Estado de Educação for all the support I needed to conclude this MA program.

A special thanks to all my close friends and students.

Abstract

This thesis proposes a study of a new postmodern prose fiction genre, the short-short story. Considerations of generic classifications and boundaries are followed by an historical overview and analysis of short fiction from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries, especially under the influence of the Russian Anton Chekhov, who is regarded as the father of the modern short story. The postmodern short-short story is seen as emerging from this trend, a hybrid genre with characteristics of the narrative language of other prose genres such as the short story and the journalistic writing. The cluster of features, such as condensation, lack of character development, surprise endings, etc., which is seen as characteristic of the short-short story are discussed, and ten examples are summarized and analyzed, including two traditional short stories for contrast. It is seen that the short-short story may be further broken into what is called "the new sudden fiction," and the even shorter and more radical "flash fiction."

RESUMO

Esta dissertação se debruça sobre o estudo de um novo gênero da ficção literária pós-moderna – o mini-conto. Discussões sobre classificações genéricas e limites são seguidas por uma análise e visão geral histórica da ficção curta do século XIX ao XXI, especialmente sob a influência do russo Antón Pávlovitch Tchekhov, o qual é considerado o pai do conto moderno. O mini-conto pós-moderno é retratado como que tendo ascendido dessa corrente, um gênero híbrido com características da linguagem narrativa de outros gêneros da prosa literária tais como o conto e a escrita jornalística. Um grupo de características, tais como concisão ou brevidade, ausência de desenvolvimento das personagens, finais surpreendentes, etc., as quais são vistas como traços do mini-conto, são sugeridas, e dez exemplos são resumidos e analisados, inclusive dois contos tradicionais para efeito de comparação. Considera-se que o mini-conto provavelmente se desdobrará no que hoje é chamado “the new sudden fiction”, e na sua outra versão ainda mais curta e radical denominada “flash fiction”.

Contents

1 Introduction: Genre Issues

The boundaries between literary genres seem blurred, especially when dealing with the genres emerging from postmodernism, such as the short-short story. Nevertheless, it is important for the study of such literary genres that some distinguishable features be pointed out. This thesis will attempt to describe the genre of the short-short story and delineate its differences from other prose forms and distinguish as far as possible the relatively new literary phenomenon of the short-short.

As Mose (84) claims, it can no longer be denied that the short-short is a separate genre and not simply a sub-category of the short story. Mose also points to the growing number of anthologies that have recently been published (84). Actually, there are very few so far. On the other hand, however, there are arguments for the presence of what is now called the short-short story as early as the nineteenth century, although that has rarely been acknowledged in the critical literature. A 1998 collection by Brixvold and Jørgensen, for example, includes texts dated from 1882 to 1998 "to show that the short shorts had been part of the twentieth-century literary history" (Mose 84).

Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories, edited by Robert Shapard and James Thomas, from 1986, contains stories from mid-twentieth century writers such as Tennessee Williams, Ernest Hemingway, and Bernard Malamud, for instance. The prevailing criterion for inclusion of those texts in a short-short collection is not form but, as the name indicates, length. In *Sudden Fiction*, none of the texts exceeds 1,500 words. In a more recent anthology, with the title of *Flash Fiction Forward: Eighty Very Short Stories* (2006), the texts are even briefer, averaging between 250 and 750 words (Mose 85). As will be discussed in Chapter Three, there are two sub-genres here: "flash fiction," a sub-genre of the short-short story, is even briefer than the "new sudden fiction," which is longer and more akin to the traditional short story.

I was introduced to the short story during a course I took four years ago – The Short Story Tradition – at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais. While spending the year of 2006 in New Jersey, USA, I received a gift card from the publisher Barnes & Noble and in Brooklyn chose a book, a collection of short-shorts. I became particularly interested in this new genre due to the innovation of trying to accomplish so much in so little space. The anthology had an "Afterword" with a forum on the new genre, by forty American writers. As Richard Bausch and R. V. Cassill state in "Writing about Fiction," printed in *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*,

> … one of the most important functions of fictive art is *pleasure*. And so the first rule of thumb for anyone assigned to write a paper about fiction is to *find something that truly does engage you*, something about which you can express yourself in terms other than the artificial, forced, exhausting phrases of false interest – that awful feeling of trying to guess what you believe your professor wants to hear, of trying to say something as if you had the slightest interest in it. (xvii, italics in original)

The expression "a page turner" for a piece of fiction that is exciting to read comes in here, for I found reading these short-shorts a pleasurable read. The editors of the first collection of flash fictions (1992) intended to publish only "texts that could be read without turning the page" so as not to break the reader's concentration. However, later on, the plan was changed and the initial idea was considered too monotonous, "because the reader actually expects and likes to turn the pages" (Mose 85). "Turning pages, it would seem, is part of what fiction is about, part of the passing of the story" (Thomas et al., qtd. in Mose 85).

Robert Shapard, in the closure of the introduction to the anthology *Sudden Fiction,* which he edited with James Thomas, attempts to give some idea of the genre's condensed power:

> Highly compressed, highly charged, insidious, protean, sudden, alarming, tantalizing, these short-shorts confer form on small corners of chaos, can do in a page what a novel does in two hundred. If they can stop time and make it timeless, they are here for you, above all, as living voices. (xvi)

A short-short writer confessed in an interview that before writing her piece of fiction, she had all the textual fragments laid scattered before her and "the composition was solely directed by the mood of the text bits themselves, not by characters or ideas about plots and events" (Mose 86). A tendency to disregard "the literary conventions of the highly plotted and formalized story marked the beginnings of a new or 'modern' kind of short fiction" (May, The Short Story, 16), which some critics think occurred as far back as the nineteenth century, with the no-beginning, no-end stories, all-middle stories of Anton Chekhov and his "new" realism. American and English writers had access to Chekhov's short stories by the beginning of the twentieth century. These stories focused "on fragments of everyday reality – and so [were] characterized as 'sketches', 'cross sections', or 'slices of life'" (May, The Short Story, 16), even while they did not have the formal construction of what was regarded as the good short story of the time. For instance, such stories "did not embody the social commitment or political convictions of the realistic novel… [rather they] combined the specific detail of realism with the poetic lyricism of romanticism" (May, The Short Story, 15-16). Short-shorts can be seen as descending from this kind of story, but is a new hybrid form that, as we shall see, combines "characteristics of the short story and journalistic writing" (Mose 81). By journalistic writing, I mean a concern to convey a message with simple, colloquial diction with the fewest possible words.

Therefore, I propose a critical analysis of short-short stories related to their poetical function and narrative brevity. Below, I question whether there are actual principles of taxonomy and whether they have ever made a definitive classification of the genres by

sharply limiting the boundaries among them, especially given the nature of hybrid genre like the short-short story. Later, I intend to analyze the principles of taxonomy as applied not only to the short-short story but to the novel and short story as well. For instance, short fiction writers of the period between 1960 and 1990 are said

> to fall into two different groups. On the one hand, the ultimate extreme of the mythic-romance is the fantastic antistory style of Jorge Luis Borges, Donald Barthelme, John Barth, and Robert Coover. On the other hand, the extremes of Chekhovian realism can be seen in the so-called "minimalism" of Ann Beattie, Mary Robison, Raymond Carver, and Tobias Wolff… [Further], the minimalist style of Raymond Carver is sometimes called "hyperrealism" and indicates that the twin streams of romance and realism are inextricably blended in the works of contemporary short story [and short-short] writers. (May, The Short Story 20)

It is notable that all the writers cited above, except for John Barth and Ann Beattie, have been published in short-short anthologies. Furthermore, in my own tentative classification, it seems that the mythic romance has inspired the sub-genre of the short-short that is called "flash fiction," and Chekhovian realism the sub-genre called "new sudden fiction." These distinctions will be discussed and illustrated in Chapters Three and Four.

In Chapter Two, I trace the origins of short fiction and the rise and development of its various types up to the birth of the modern short story in the twentieth century. In Chapter Three I approach the short-short story itself, its origins and development, and discuss the two sub-genres. In Chapter Four, a case study of ten very different short-shorts will be presented. The first two are "traditional" stories, included there for the sake of comparison, which were published in the first American anthology (i.e. Shapard & Thomas's *Sudden Fiction,* 1986)

for their brevity. The next eight examples are contemporary productions in the postmodern model.

Genre issues have, in recent decades, engaged critics. Mary Louise Pratt, in her article "The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It," warns us not to oversimplify when relating the history of literary genres. She avers that the "tendency is to see them as related to and differentiated from each other always in the same ways, and to search for a set of universal distinctive features of genre" (111). This is exactly what the concept of generic identity is: "a set of universal distinctive features of genre." The taxonomic principles, which are conventions created by scholars to classify the literary genres by defining, "limiting" and posing differences among them, do use the concept of generic identity when classifying literary genres.

Pratt proposes genre criticism based not only on supposed criterial features, but also on "non-essential and occasional ones…characteristics that aren't relevant points of contrast with other genres, or with vaguer tendencies and trends not visible in all members of the genre, but present often enough to be noticed" (93). She does not assert that an attempt to describe a genre must not make reference to other genres, but does assert that the relations between genres do not have to be symmetrical (96). These remarks are important, but Pratt goes on to propose eight points in a rather schematic way, demonstrating a dependent, rather than interdependent, relation between the short story and the novel.

"Proposition 1 – The novel tells a life, the short story tells a fragment of a life" (99). There are exceptions, however: Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, novels that portray a one-day fragment in the lives of the protagonists. Conversely, Ernest Hemingway's "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," is a short story that attempts to portray an entire life, albeit a short one. In other words, a novel is never too long for a few moments of a life, nor is a short story too brief to tell an entire life.

"Proposition 2 – The short story deals with a single thing, the novel with many things" (101). The author's emphasis here is on the word *single* and reminds the author of Poe's quest for a "single effect" in the short story, or, one might add, Brander Matthews's dictum that "a short story deals with a single character, a single event, a single emotion, or the series of emotions called forth by a single situation" (Matthew 73). It is commonplace for short stories to be structured on a single event or incident such as a picnic, a farewell party, a reunion, etc, and the novel on a series of such episodes. However, Pratt admits that the fact must not be elevated to a "criterial feature of the genre" (102).

"Proposition 3 – The short story is a sample, the novel is the whole hog" (102). Here, Pratt conveys the idea that short stories tend to be a development of what is summed up in their titles and suggests it would be a regress to the origins of the short story: the exemplum, with its moral lesson tagged to its title, and "the joke with its punch line" (103).

"Proposition 4 – The novel is a whole text, the short story is not" (103). What the author seems to mean is that a short story is not printed on its own but always as part of a collection of its kind, but she may have forgotten that originally, and almost always, short stories are printed in magazines before being gathered into collections (which is even more true with the short-short, which may be found in magazines or newspapers, or even on the radio and electronic media). Pratt states that "though this is not a determining factor, it is likely that the fact of not being an autonomous text reinforces the view of the short story as a part or fragment….This is certainly a more useful distinction than the traditional *able to be read in one sitting*" (104). Poe was the one who, on theorizing about the tale—the new genre was not named the short story as yet—discussed this unique trait of brevity in the emerging genre at the time. A tale should be brief enough, "able to be read in one sitting" (Poe 61).

Pratt's number 5 – "Subject matter" (104) states that the short story is considered a less important and minor genre when compared to the novel. Nevertheless, it is used to introduce new subject matter into the social arena. As an illustration,

> Maupassant through the short story breaks down taboos on matters of sexuality and class. In the establishment of a modern national literature in Ireland, the short story emerges as the central prose fiction genre, through which Joyce … and so many others first document modern Irish Life. (Pratt 104)

Pratt also mentions the age of empiricism and the use of the short story to present the fantastic and the supernatural: "topics marginalized and stigmatized by a novel consolidating itself around realism" (107). One might add that a similar phenomenon occurred with the once marginalized genre of Science Fiction, which in contemporary American literature has since Thomas Pynchon been very much mainstream fiction.

Pratt's number 6 – "Orality" (107) is another distinction. It is not that the written format, typical of the novel, is not present in the short story, but there is a trend to incorporate

> oral-colloquial speech forms in the language of narration, through instances where an oral narrative is embedded in the story, *e.g.* Chekhov's "Gooseberries," to instances where the whole text takes the form of represented speech, [*e.g.* Raymond Carver`s short-short story "Popular Mechanics"], often first person narration in an oral setting, *e.g.* Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart"…. Here the asymmetry between novel and short story appears. (Pratt 107-08)

In number 7 – "Narrative Traditions" (108), Pratt refers to the commencement of short fiction and the different origins that the two genres, novel and short story, had. As will be seen in the following chapter, these two genres are associated with different narrative traditions. We may still perceive in modern children's literature the types of tales that are the

remnants of the origins of the short story. The novel quite often reaches back "to history and document" and grounds itself very much on these kinds of texts.

Pratt's number 8 – "Craft versus art" (109) discusses the more controversial issue on the generic identity of the short story as the trend to evaluate the genre "as a skill or craft-based rather than a creativity-based art" (109). The origin of this notion lies in the ties that link journalism to the short story. Not only the short story, but also the short-short story, have been influenced by journalistic style. Commercially, having a large spectrum of readers is to the point, and there is no doubt that many writers aim at a mass public, which, however, goes against older more elitist views, such as Mallarmé's, that "art is a mystery accessible only to the very few" (Pratt 110). In brief, "the short story becomes anathema to the art-for-art's-sake values that consolidated themselves in the modernist period" (Pratt 110).

It is, however, obvious that a good piece of fiction must be both imaginative and well-crafted. Craft alone cannot create a convincing work of literature. Jason Sanford, in his paper "Who Wears Short Shorts? Micro Stories and MFA Disgust," writes about the quality of contemporary short fiction and the craft-and-skills schools that try to instruct potential writers who lack creativity and a certain voice. By "voice," he means a talent

> which can take decades to develop. By voice, I mean more than merely the style or tone of the story – I also mean voice as encompassing an author's vision, thought, and insight. When this total view of voice is combined with a writer's skill and craft, great writing results. (Sanford, screen 4)

If a story is written only with "craft and skill," it will be something mechanical. Craft is technique – an ability that one acquires through practice, but creativity or talent – the imaginative aspect, as it were – makes the difference. It cannot be taught.

I see Pratt's eight proposals as an attempt to break through the strict boundaries of the concept of generic identity and the rigid taxonomic principles of classification in use

nowadays by genre criticism. Nevertheless, it seems that her proposals are also boundaries and taxonomic principles. The only difference is that they are not solely based on criterial features of genres, but also on "non-essential and occasional ones" (Pratt 93), as mentioned above. In fact, Pratt herself questions the ideological reasons that brought forth the present genre classifications. She asserts they were made to look natural, but they are culturally determined. Referring to such cultural influences on principles of generic classification, she states

> they are human institutions, historical through and through. The massive effort within literary criticism to maintain the lyric-epic-dramatic triad as ahistorical generic absolutes is seriously misdirected, though of great ideological interest. The myriad attempts to link the lyric-epic-dramatic triad with other phenomena … are directed toward making these classical genre distinctions look natural rather than cultural, thus separating the sphere of art off from other spheres of discourse, and from social life in general. (Pratt 92)

In the next chapter, an historical view of short fiction will be offered in order to contextualize the short-short within its parent genre.

2 The Short Story: Origins and Development

There are several categories of short fiction that are taught informally or referred to simply as the "short story," and since its rise it has changed considerably into what we today call the contemporary short story. And yet, it is difficult to say precisely whether the short story is positioned asymmetrically, paralleled, embedded in the novel, or bears a relation of cause and effect. The birth of the English novel was realism, that is, a kind of prose that seeks "truth," or more precisely verisimilitude (*vraisemblance*) in the narrative (Watt 11-12). The short story, on the other hand, is related to oral traditions, genres such as the *exemplum*, the fairy-tale, the fable, the biblical parable (Pratt 108). Another important point is that the short story has developed a great deal since its beginnings in the nineteenth century. This chapter will trace its development.

2.1. The Short-Story vs. the Novel

Charles E. May, who is the most frequently cited critical expert on the short story as a genre, says the story preceded the novel in its primal origins: "Studies in anthropology suggest that brief episodic narratives, which constitute the basis of the short story, are primary, preceding later epic forms, which constitute the basis of the novel" (May, The Short Story 1). The origins of the short story reach further back than the epic forms such as *Beowulf* in the English language. Éjxenbaum (81) claims that "the novel derives from history, from travels; the story – from folklore, anecdote." Pratt also claims that in the short story, we can perceive "remains of oral, folk, and biblical narrative traditions, like the fairy tale, the ghost story, parable, exemplum, fabliau, (and) animal fable" (Pratt 108).

One might begin by mentioning Boccaccio's *Decameron*, written from 1348 to 1353, and Cervantes's *Novelas Ejemplares*, from 1613, two early collections of short tales. Boccaccio's stories were not marked by the sacred nor did they obey the exemplum format, which conveyed a moral in the story.

> The fable and the exemplum are minimal narrative forms arising from minimal systematic texts such as maxims, proverbs, and moral precepts… In the fable, the general appears *as* the particular; in the exemplum it appears *in* the particular. In the first case, the general is represented, in the second it is implied… The basic rule underlying the unity of the whole is the "purpose" of the exemplum – the moral precept. (Stierle 21-23)

The exemplum is much older than Boccaccio's stories, as old as ancient Greece. Aristotle made a difference between the fable and the exemplum in his *Rhetorica* (Stierle 23). Nevertheless, before the end of the eighteenth century, for historical and philosophical reasons, the exemplum faded out (Stierle 27). For his part, Boccaccio narrates the "profane world of everyday reality," but his characters, although they do not illustrate virtuous conduct, are still not as-if-real people; on the contrary, "they are primarily functions of the stories in which they appear." Boccaccio is a "collector and teller of formalized traditional tales" (May, The Short Story 3-4).

One step further is Cervantes, who also attempted to transcribe everyday life in his narratives, but, differently from Boccaccio, the adaptor of traditional tales and creator of character types, Cervantes presents himself "as an inventor of original stories…based on the observation of 'real' people." The shift from the supernatural (sacred) to the natural in the seventeenth century was influenced by the French and would yield eighteenth-century realism and the eighteenth-century novel. As May says (The Short Story 3-4), "…short fiction was almost completely replaced by the novel during this period." Realism was thus incorporated

into the English novel, which, in its turn, almost completely replaced short fiction for some time.

As the short story would find its fruition in the New World, one might at this point focus on how that happened. Good argues that, by contrast with England, in the United States,

> the preconditions of the social novel were not fully present until late in the nineteenth century, with urbanization and the pacification and settlement of the West. Instead, the adventure novel, the historical novel and, above all, the "tale" were the most appropriate literary vehicles. Poe's aesthetic of intensity and unity of effects sets the pattern for the development of short fiction in America. [By contrast], in England during the last two decades of the nineteenth century the monopoly of the three-volume novel as the standard fictional form was effectively broken. New magazines appeared which preferred complete short stories to serials, and many new opportunities were opened up to writers of short fiction. (Good 158-59)

According to Wendell V. Harris, short fiction held an insignificant place in England till the nineteenth century. That condition only started to change with the strong rise of the novel in late eighteenth century and the "discovery of history" through a "historical consciousness" somewhat later. Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* has shown that the emergence of the novel also coincided with the rise of a middle class. Influenced by realism, the novel was "an attempt to encompass the meaning of history and of society" (Harris 184).

Harris, however, suggests that short fiction writers from the 1890s were influenced by the Gothic romance and the novel. In fact, Harris says that short fiction pieces at the time

> were miniatures either of the Gothic romance or the novel. The first led to the tale, tending, as Northrop Frye has suggested, not only to stylization but to the

> "nihilistic and untamable:" to ghost stories, wild adventures, hair-breadth escapes. The second tended simply to disaster. (Harris 187)

Why disaster? If the novel influenced short fiction at that time, short fiction writers then tended to copy *ipsissima verba* the style, tone and form of the novel, but that did not work due to the size boundaries of the tale. The short fiction piece was hindered by copying literally the novel within the limited space it offered the writer to create a realistic world.

> It tried to translate a vision for which the short fiction piece simply could not be appropriate… The closer the tale approached the novel, the further it was forced to move from the essentially ahistorical, sonnet-like, and highly focused vision which is characteristic of the true short story. (Harris 187)

Harris here points to some structural and thematic features characteristic of the short story as opposed to the novel: ahistorical rather than tied to an historical context, a greater focus as opposed to a looser narrative form like the novel, and the suggest of a structure closer to poetry (sonnet-like) rather than the novel. In addition, the shorter form strove "to accommodate *realism* at the end of the nineteenth century, focused on an experience under the influence of a particular mood and therefore depended more on tone than on plot as a principle of unity" (May, Chekhov 200, italics in original).

Some critics also believe that the shorter form also showed differences in choices about subject and theme. Harris, for example, quotes the Irish short-story master Frank O'Connor, who also agrees with Pratt when he states the short story is the natural vehicle for the presentation of the "defiant, those outside conventional society" (O'Connor, qtd. in Harris 188). Pratt uses a broader concept: "new subject matters." While the novel adheres to the "concept of a civilized society," the short story "remains by its very nature remote from the community – romantic, individualistic, and intransigent" (O'Connor, qtd. in Harris 188). Graham Good even believes that the differences in formal structure follow from the different

thematic choices. In his paper "Notes on the Novella," comparing the novel and the short story, again refers to O'Connor's view: "Where the novel concerns individuals within society, the short story treats groups which are outside it, or at any rate outside the normal social experience to be expected of the reader. The formal differences between the two genres stem from this" (156).

2.2. The Short Story vs. the Novella

Good, however, contradicts himself when he states in the same paper that all the differences described by critics may "boil down to" the idea that short fictions are distinct from the novel simply because they are shorter (Good 147). Some theorists have even tried to limit the literary genres by the number of words, such as Mary Doyle Springer, who, in her book *Forms of the Modern Novella* takes the novella as a narrative of middle length (roughly 15,000 to 50,000 words) between the short story and the novel. Even so, those attempts seem arbitrary, and, as Good admits, "there are always borderline cases" (147). Good proposes to leave behind genre definitions and work individually with separate texts from a certain author, analyzing them by considering solely the writer's oeuvre, "within a general perspective on fiction dominated by the novel" (147). He suggests the difficulty is caused by the actual "adjacency" of the short fiction to the novel:

> Other genres can be *opposed* to each other more easily by basic plot-form (comedy *versus* tragedy) or medium of presentation (drama *versus* novel), where novel and short fiction are always in some awkward way *next* to each other, overlapping and interpenetrating. Nevertheless, there has been a number of efforts at disentangling the two. (147, italics in original)

And, as a result, he attempts to fit all forms of short fiction into the category of novella with all "its complex semantic-historical relations with the novel" (147). He thus proposes to use the term *novella* "to cover both the short and the medium length" stories. In order to convince his readers of his working thesis, he presents the following justifications:

> (1) In the Renaissance the term encompassed both the very brief stories in the *Decameron* and the middle-length *Novelas Ejemplares* of Cervantes. (2) In post-19th century German practice "Novelle" includes texts of under five and well over a hundred pages. (3) The nineteenth-century English terms "tale" and "story" covered both lengths. (4) "Short story" is a mainly twentieth-century phrase for a particular type of magazine fiction; it has been applied to earlier and foreign fictions to which it is not always appropriate, though naturally it has a place within the family of terms I want to cover with "novella". (5) Short and medium lengths have enough in common in form, content, and history to justify opposing them conjointly to the novel in the German manner, and employing a two-part model (novella / novel) in preference to a three-part one (short story / novella / novel). [Good 150-51]

In fact, the term novella is gaining acceptance throughout academia, among critics, writers, and even publishers, as a literary piece of medium length – a genre shorter than the novel and longer than the short story. As Good points out, however, "tale" and "story," older terms, were interchangeable and were actually used to denote short prose of around five up to a hundred pages (Good 148), but the usage of those terms

> was eroded in the late nineteenth century by the magazine term "short story," which, with its connotations of abruptness and curtailment, tended to confine itself to the lower end of this range – short story manuals still preach an ascetic

> brevity, attained by diligent cutting and paring away the fat, until the art comes to seem one of pure omission. (Good 148)

Therefore, some contemporary critics have gone even beyond the feature of length to suggest other criterial features that characterize modern literature, such as the "ironic style" – a "style that, even as it seems realistic on its surface, in fact emphasizes the radical difference between the routine of everyday reality and the incisive nature of story itself as the only means to know true reality" (May, Chekhov 211). To sum up, brevity is the obvious but not only difference of short fiction.

2.3. The Short Story vs. the Tale: the American Connection

Tale, the older term for a short piece, whether oral or written, is sometimes used as an alternative for short story, but, as we have seen, the latter term was introduced relatively late. In the 1850s, a great number of tales or stories were published in American magazines, and yet few of them may be regarded as memorable works of art, and because of that, the period from 1850 to the beginning of the Civil War [1861] "has been discredited and generally ignored in the history of American short fiction" (Marler 165). The evolution from the magazine tale to the short story has generally been disregarded because it took place exactly around that time. Robert F. Marler, in his essay "From Tale to Short Story: The Emergence of a New Genre in the 1850s," proposes that "the decay of the immensely popular tale fostered the development of the short story as a new genre" (165). The mediocrity of such tales in general, their "little aesthetic appeal," caused an immense reaction among writers and literary critics of the time.

Brander Matthews is said to be the first critic to have identified the short story as a separate genre from the novel in 1901. He was the first one to call it so, in spite of the fact

that it was successfully produced and developed throughout the whole nineteenth century in the United States, in America (Shapard and Thomas, Sudden Fiction xii). H. G. Wells called the 1890s "the Golden Age" of the short story in England. That may have come about, in an indirect way, from Edgar Allan Poe; for it was, May argues, Poe who inspired Baudelaire, "who in turn inspired the symbolist movement, which ultimately gave impetus to the development of the short story during this period" (May, The Short Story 14). May supports the idea that it was not Kipling but Joseph Conrad who "effectively made the transition… [from] the old-fashioned tale of the nineteenth century [to] the modern short story" (May, The Short Story 15). And Baudelaire's symbolism was "the basis of Conrad's symbolism/impressionism" added by remarks of Poe "that fiction must aspire to the magic suggestiveness of music, and that explicitness is fatal to art" (May, The Short Story 15). May concludes stating that "Conrad tried – where Joyce later succeeded, in such famous stories as 'The Dead' – to convey this magical suggestiveness by focusing on concrete situations in the real world" (May, The Short Story 15).

Éjxenbaum, in his study "O. Henry and the Theory of the Short Story," states that

> the story, precisely as *small form* (short story), has nowhere been so consistently cultivated as in America. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, American literature, in the minds both of its writers and readers, was merged with English literature and largely incorporated into it as a "provincial" literature. (82-83, italics in original)

In the 1830s and 1840s, American novelists published their novels in English magazines, while most of the publications in American magazines were short stories: "the genre was associated with, not engendered by, the propagation of magazines" (Éjxenbaum 83). Periodicals were therefore the springs that launched the short story as well as the short-

short into the world. Éjxenbaum depicts many differences between the novel and the short story. He asserts that

> The novel derives from history, from travels; the story – from folklore, anecdote. The difference is one of essence, a difference in principle conditioned by the fundamental distinction between *big* and *small* form… Short story is a term referring exclusively to plot, one assuming a combination of two conditions: *small* size and *plot impact* on the ending. Conditions of this sort produce something totally distinct in aim and devices from the novel. (81, italics in original)

Brander Matthews also spends most of his essay, "The Philosophy of the Short-Story," by drawing differences between the novel and the short-story, which he insists on hyphenating. "A true Short-Story is something other and something more than a mere story which is short" (73). Among the many differences the author stresses one may cite a unity that the short story has and the novel cannot have:

> A Short-story deals with a single character, a single event, a single emotion, or the series of emotions called forth by a single situation… The Short-story is the single effect, complete and self-contained, while the Novel is of necessity broken into a series of episodes. Thus the Short-story has, what the Novel cannot have, the effect of "totality," as Poe called it, the unity of impression. (Matthews 73)

Poe developed his concept of "totality of interest" when he asserted that

> the ordinary novel is objectionable, from its length… As it cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from *totality* [of interest]…in the brief tale, however, the author is enabled to

> carry out the fullness of his intention, be it what it may. (Poe 61, italics in original)

What Matthews means by "a single emotion, a single situation" is evidently the result of what Poe means when he says "can be read at one sitting." As the moment will be a single moment, the effect will be singular as well, a "unity of impression." This comparison recalls a comment by Éjxenbaum, who claims the reverse influence: that of the short story on the novel; he cites as an example Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*: "The novel has only three characters, bound to one another by a single secret which is disclosed in the last chapter ('Revelation'). There are no parallel intrigues, no digressions or episodes; there is complete unity of time, place and action" (Éjxenbaum 87).

2.4. The Emergence of the Modern Short Story

Northrop Frye, in his seminal *Anatomy of Criticism*, has drawn generic distinctions between the tale and the short story. The tale is comparable to the prose romance, while the short story is akin to the novel. The tale depicts no "real people;" characters are "stylized figures" that expand into "psychological archetypes" made up for their "subjective intensity" and there is therefore a trend toward allegory. On the contrary, the short story portrays characters that have "personality" and wear "their *personae* or social masks." In the same way, the writer presents a steadfast society, and his world of fiction tends to be a copy of mankind's real world (Frye, qtd. in Marler 166). Unlike the tale, "characters in the short story have an inner consciousness" (Marler 166). It seems that Frye believes the short story to be closer to the novel than the tale.

Marler, agreeing with Frye's point and explaining why these older stories are aesthetically less interesting, argues that in the tales from the 19th century

> characters are romance figures or stereotypes illustrating popular values and ideals. They have no interior life beyond what the invariably omniscient narrator asserts they have. Their virtue or sinfulness accords with notions of Protestant piety… They tend to be overtly allegorical … [and portrayal] … simplified outline of an idea or belief. (167)

Tale writers of the time built their themes on "didactic passages" avoiding "ambiguity, complexity, and richness… Plots [were] designed to *prove* the moral, regardless of violations of a work's basic premises." In addition, the authors of tales had an "inflated *literary* style," making use of circumlocutions and formal diction in order to insinuate "that the flattered reader is intelligent and sophisticated" (Marler 167-68). Critics of the time started to see the exaggeration and the decadence of the genre – a slavery to form to please readers and the *status quo* of society. "The primary targets of attacks on the magazines were sentimentalism and didactic moralism" (Marler 168). Marler explains in details what happened to the form.

> Characters and their situations deserved every bit of the emotion the readers bestowed on them. But the point is that writers exaggerated situations and attenuated and simplified characters for the sake of emotion… As propaganda, its emotionalism, anti-intellectualism, and conventional appeal to women had become epidemic. It was making critics ill… By 1860, Henry Giles obliged to blast anything remotely attributable to sentimentality…, "a pretentious unrealism"… To summarize: commentary in leading publications attacked the excesses of sentimentalism, deplored the distortions of moralism and didacticism, and depreciated the importance of plot. Critics, while simultaneously retaining the single-effect concept and the necessity of implied significance, were encouraging the modification of the conventional tale. If they also advocated a realistic world of fiction, then they had, more or less

> unintentionally, established basic conditions suitable for the development of the new genre. (169-72)

At this point, the ground was prepared for the emergence of the modern short story. Marler argues that the three most important short fiction writers of the time were Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville, "the three masters of short fiction" (175). Poe wrote only tales. His characters "would be destroyed by common reality" (166). Hawthorne and Melville wrote both tales and short stories. Hawthorne was praised for the undercurrent of significance in his tales. "The ability to suggest, to evoke, without resorting to explanations was increasingly praised. Tacked-on moral tags became a sign of mediocrity, even if *the brilliancy of style is on them like the sun*" (Nordhoff, qtd. in Marler 170, italics in original). These writers signaled the beginning of the metamorphosis from tale to short story.

At that time, critics and reviewers saw realism as the representation of natural men in their surroundings, but these three key writers have a different concept of realism. The concept of realism in fiction derived "from the older *vraisemblance* or verisimilitude after the extraordinary or supernatural subjects were stripped away." Poe used the word "earnestness" instead of verisimilitude. The latter term used to be applied as a compliment to an author "for making the extraordinary or marvelous convincing by direct references to actual life. [In the 1850's], verisimilitude, like *vraisemblance*, its synonym among reviewers, was deemed Poe's highest achievement" (Marler 173).

Actually, to Melville, "the actual world is a façade, even a lie. The fictive world is an artifice that leads to Truth, though, paradoxically, the writer must begin with the materials of real life to penetrate to the core of meaning. Hence, actuality is fundamental to the art of fiction" (Marler 175). Among these three major short fiction writers of the 1850s, Melville was the closest to the modern short story as opposed to the older tale because his portrayals were mimetic and he relied "on facts for the profound probing of everyday reality," which

was "a broad shift from Poe's overt romance and verisimilitude [and then], Hawthorne's neutral ground of actual and imaginary" (Marler 176-77). The modern short story at this juncture, therefore, is considered better the more it conforms to realism.

2.5. The Modern Short Story: the Importance of Anton Chekhov

May, in his article "Chekhov and the Modern Short Story," calls attention to "the nature of art that has characterized Western culture since the early nineteenth century and which Ortega y Gasset so clearly delineated in *The Dehumanization of Art*" (215). Those ones who pinpoint flaws in the short story, and miss the bourgeois comfort of nineteenth century realism, have forgotten the golden path to art, "the will to style," which means a deformation of lifelike reality, a derealization in the perception of current facts in prose fiction. To stylize, therefore, "means to deform reality, to derealize: style involves dehumanization" (Ortega Y Gasset, qtd. in May, Chekhov 215). Granted that, the modern short story, particularly the Chekhovian, broke from certain notions of realism, the mimetic portrayal of reality, to pursue modernist precepts that prescribed a ban on "the cause-and-effect nature of plot and the 'as-if-real' nature of character" (May, Chekhov 215). Postmodernist fictions, such as the short-short story, also follow such modes: "contemporary fiction is less and less about objective reality and more and more about its own creative processes" (May, Chekhov 215).

On this will to style, May supplies one more difference between the short story and the Chekhovian version:

> …. the Chekhovian short story lies in this will to style in which reality is derealized and ideas live solely as ideas. Thus Chekhov's stories are more "poetic," that is, more "artistic" than we usually expect fiction to be; they help define the difference between the loose and baggy monstrous novel and the

> taut, gemlike short story. One final implication of Chekhov's focus on the "will to style" is the inevitable self-consciousness of fiction as fiction. (May, Chekhov 215)

In this view, Chekhov becomes the father of the contemporary short story – and, as will be seen in the third and fourth chapters, indirectly the father of the contemporary short-short story. To sum up, the Russian writer's style and voice, all the characteristics of his writing – the association with lyric poetry, the freedom from highly plotted stories, the sparing use of language, the minimal plot as a lyricized sketch, atmosphere as an ambiguous mixture of both external details and psychic projections, the spare dialogue of characters, the focus of reality as a fictional construct and a function of perspectival point of view, characters often having no names or only first names and being briefly described, character as mood rather than realistic depiction, and hybridism, among others (May, Chekhov 199-213) – suit perfectly the perceived features of modern short fiction such as that found in Joyce's *Dubliners*, as well as examples of contemporary short-short story writers. Chekhov's most immediate impact was on three important modernists: the Irishman James Joyce, the New Zealander Katherine Mansfield, and the American Sherwood Anderson. Subsequently, these writers would influence other important short story writers, such as Bernard Malamud, Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver, and Robert Coover.

May points out the two major categories or sub-genres of short fiction: "the legendary tale form…, as in Hawthorne" and the story with a "presentation of the single event, as in Chekhov" (May, Chekhov 214). But, again, these sub-genres may be seen to develop historically into other sub-types, with

> two completely different textures in short fiction – the former characterized by such writers as Eudora Welty in the forties and fifties and Bernard Malamud in the sixties and seventies whose styles are thick with metaphor and myth, and

> the latter characterized by such writers as Hemingway in the twenties and thirties and Raymond Carver in the seventies and eighties whose styles are thin to the point of disappearing. (May, Chekhov 214)

To conclude this section, one might briefly comment on Chekhov's piece, "The Short Story," which is really a collection of extracts from letters that Chekhov wrote to friends and relatives commenting on their story writing. He shows a humble attitude when making assertions, always making it clear that he might be wrong. For instance,

> the short story, like the stage, has its conventions. My instinct tells me that at the end of a novel or a story, I must artfully concentrate for the reader an impression of the entire work, and therefore must casually mention something about those whom I have already presented. Perhaps I am in error. (Chekhov 195)

The letters also make it clear that he dislikes subjectivity in short fiction.

> I reckon entirely upon the reader to add for himself the subjective elements that are lacking in the story … Subjectivity is a terrible thing. It is bad in this alone, that it reveals the author's hands and feet…And you did not write for the reader. You wrote because *you* like that sort of chatter. (Chekhov 195-96)

Finally, he reinforces the necessity of brevity in short fiction: "but in short stories it is better to say not enough than to say too much" (198).

2.6. Can the Short Story Be Defined?

If it is not impossible, it is extremely difficult to give a perennial definition of the short story because, as has been seen in this chapter, the genre has developed and changed over time. Beyond the differences between terms used for the genre, namely, the tale, the "story,"

the novella, and the short story (or as Matthews would have it, the short-story), and finally, the short-short story, there have been, as we have seen in earlier sections of this chapter, proposals that suggest the novella is the great genus and all the other short fiction categories, including the short story, are species. Nowadays, there is a trend to call all these supposedly sub-categories or (in Good's view) sub-genres, genres.

If genre and sub-genre are viable terms, the short story is not a dead genre like the epic, but a developing genre with subclassifications constantly being added, which is why we cannot have a definition with an agreed upon set of features, such as the epic has. The modern short story, May believes, is a hybrid genre that presents a complex set of generic features (May, Chekhov 199). Most definitions, however, consider only "the dominant aspects of the system" (Pasco 117). Since the prevailing system adopted by taxonomic principles to classify genres in literature makes use only of the dominant aspects of the literary category, as opposed to Pratt's trial, we have a "deformation of the remaining elements" (Pasco 117) which are not in the foreground but instead in the background, which is exactly what Pratt is against.

Pasco argues, however, that definition still seems to be needed: "it may be impossible to define a genre, but readers do it all the time, and they use their definitions as guides" (117). These are labels we were brought up with, we were taught that way in school; in other words, they were introjected into our selves, and now it is very difficult to live without them. Pasco therefore argues the possibility of a successful definition of genre:

> The work of defining a genre succeeds when the definition corresponds to general practice and understanding, when it includes the samples generally included, and excludes those normally left out, when its categories do not erroneously focus on elements which cause misapprehensions. (118)

If the generic markers of genre are helpful and useful because "at some point distinctions must be made," at the same time "inclusion or exclusion from a genre does not affect the quality of a work, [in spite of the fact] it may encourage readers to read with inappropriate expectations" (Pasco 123).

> It is indisputable that most readers are firmly conscious of genre and use their preconception to guide their reading. The more adequate that preconception, the more chance there is of an adequate reading which recognizes the true significance of the story, whether it be in line with or in revolt against that particular cluster of traits. (Pasco 127)

If a definition is to be derived from distinctive features, the criterion of brevity, Poe's "able to be read at one sitting," seems to be the one most accepted by critics with few exceptions, Pratt being one of them. The problem with the distinction is its relativity: "some people can sit for longer periods than others" and some people read faster than others, thereafter accomplishing more at their time sitting. Nevertheless, "it emphasizes the absolute impossibility of extreme arbitrariness, without denying the necessity of shortness, however it be defined" (Pasco 123).

In any case, it seems clear that the size of the short story has no relation to its quality. There are excellent short stories that due to their size would be called today short-shorts, which have less than one thousand words, such as Maupassant's "*Le Lit*," as well as excellent long ones, such as Joyce's "The Dead" which has around fifty pages.

Brevity, however, does impose certain conditions and particular forms. "*C'est que la brièveté n'est jamais aléatoire, mais qu'elle constitue un modele formalisant* [Brevity is never aleatory, but rather it constitutes a formalizing model]" (Zumthor, qtd. in Pasco 124). Among other generic markers of the genre, Pasco mentions the lack of "loosely motivated detail, [the

tendency] toward the general, [the expectation readers have pertaining] the vocabulary to bear more than its usual significance, [a tendency] to universalize, a frequent use of ellipsis" (125).

Brevity may be seen in another way, for example, the American writer-poet Conrad Aiken's comment on Katherine Mansfield, whom he regarded as one of the primary followers of Chekhov:

> Miss Mansfield has followed Chekhov in choosing to regard … the short story *form*… as … the presentation of a *quintessence*, a summation of a human life or group of lives in the single significant *scene* or situation or episode. (Aiken, qtd. in Good 159, italics in original)

Aiken has here conflated a structural feature, brevity, with a thematic one: a quintessentializing of a complete idea in a representative one.

3 The Short-Short: the Emergence of a Genre

The short-short story, or sudden fiction, blaster, snapper, sketch, prose poem, prose fiction, vignette, experimental fiction, anecdote, enigma, flash fiction, mini fiction, fast fiction, skinny fiction, quick fiction, micro-fiction, draft, picture, text, are some of the names that this new literary genre has received; and it has only recently been classified as a separate category. In the last years of the 20th century, the short-short was considered a sub-category or a sub-sub-category of the short story, as for example, in Robert Shapard and James Thomas's *Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories* (1986), the first anthology of the form. In more recent publications by the same authors, *New Sudden Fiction: Short-Short Stories from America and Beyond* (2007) and *Flash Fiction Forward: 80 Very Short Stories* (2006), they consider it a separate genre.

Around the 1990s, short fiction had a genuine revival under the influence of the fiction of Jorge Luis Borges and Raymond Carver (Mose 84). A new kind of short fiction, the pioneering short-shorts were originally published in magazines and newspapers and began to appear as "generic markers." They combined characteristics of the short story, the poem, and journalism. The hybridism, bricolage and pastiche from postmodernist fiction characterize the emerging genre as a space without a single identity but with features and traits from distinct sources. W. S. Penn, in his article "The Tale as Genre in Short Fiction," writes: "It [does not] mean that a combination of elements from different genres could not be used by the story writer. What it means is that generic theory must evolve – grow or completely change – along with the development of new genres" (54).

I shall propose a critical analysis of short-short stories related to the poetical function and narrative brevity, which will lead to other concepts, functions, and practices. The short-short mixes poetic condensation with the fictional narrative language of longer forms, as well as the more concise prose style of journalism. The lack of a singular, definite, and precise

form for the contemporary short-short, which would provide a traditional classification for the genre, is an invitation to critique. It may be more fruitful to suggest features, or a cluster of features that may be applied to examples in order to define the genre as a hybrid.

3.1 Short-Short Story: Condensation

In terms of condensation, the short-shorts are, as their name indicates, even briefer than the short story and may be seen as akin to poetry. The writer-critic Joyce Carol Oates, for example, asserts in the "Afterwords" of *Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories*, that "the rhythmic form of the short-short story is often more temperamentally akin to poetry than to conventional prose, which generally opens out to dramatize experience and to evoke emotion; in the smallest, tightest spaces, experience can only be suggested" (Shapard and Thomas, Sudden Fiction 247). To support her argument, Oates quotes Kafka's "The Sirens:"

> These are the seductive voices of the night; the Sirens, too, sang that way. It would be doing them an injustice to think that they wanted to seduce; they knew they had claws and sterile wombs, and they lamented this aloud. They could not help it if their laments sounded so beautiful. (Kafka, qtd. in Shapard and Thomas, Sudden Fiction 246)

Oates thinks that very short fictions are "reminiscent of Robert Frost's definition of a poem – a structure of words that consumes itself as it unfolds, like ice melting on a stove" (Shapard and Thomas, Sudden Fiction 246).

Not only brevity, but tightness and condensation are points that weigh much, and so the use of each word, the essentialness and precision of every piece of information form the framework of the short-short story. The short-short, like the poem, combines power and brevity in a web of words. In the same book (*Sudden Fiction*), the writer Grace Paley also

claims that "a short story is closer to the poem than to the novel… and when it's very very short – 1, 2, 2 ½ pages – should be read like a poem. That is, slowly. People who like to skip, can't skip in a 3-page story" (253). The economy of means in the short-short demands a really distinct sort of reading from that of the short story and the novel – genres with which short-shorts have been compared (Mose 82). Other writers have also supported the notion that short-shorts resemble poetry. Charles Johnson lists two qualities that the short-short demands: compression and economy (Shapard and Thomas, Sudden Fiction 233). Charles E. May had even argued that the short story – not even the short-short story - "has always been more closely associated with lyric poetry than with its overgrown narrative neighbor, the novel" (May, Chekhov 214).

Contrary to this view, Gordon Weaver points out that fiction, either short or long, has a narrative and poetry does not (Shapard and Thomas, Sudden Fiction 228). He argues therefore that the short-short is more akin to other narrative genres than to poetry. He thinks that the prose-poem is a bastard genre, a contradiction in terms (229), but one might argue that a prose-poem is a lyric written in prose rather than verse, but not containing a narrative.

Poe, early as 1842, sixty years before Brander Matthews attempted to define the art of the short story, also presented differences between poetry and short fiction, arguing "the tale has a point of superiority over the poem" (61). He defended the thesis that while the latter seeks the development of the idea of the Beautiful, the former has its basis in *Truth*: "truth is often, and in very great degree, the aim of the tale" (62). Robert Kelly, takes a more conciliatory intermediate ground, seeing the new genre of the short-short as one that "has become the great fertile plain where, for once, poets and novelists can meet together as equals, and each produce effective work, funded by their separate dispositions and preparations" (Shapard and Thomas, Sudden Fiction 239).

One might also argue that what makes the contemporary short-short like a poem is not only condensation but the importance of tone and rhythm. By rhythm, I mean what Robert Kelly calls "rhythmic scope," a "focus on the *time of the experience of the text*" which he thinks is exactly what characterizes the new form (Shapard and Thomas, Sudden Fiction 240, italics in original). Gitte Mose calls rhythm "impressionistic form" (81). The writer tries to capture the impressions, the prints or marks left by the moment of occurrence of an event. By tone, I mean a style or manner of writing opposed to the traditional form (as defined below). Robert Fox avers that "short-shorts can be tone pieces, much like poems… [I see] the structure of the work in its entirety [but] I know the difference [between a poem and a short-short] because I've chosen the form deliberately, instinctively" (Shapard and Thomas, Sudden Fiction 252).

Short-short writers are not very much concerned with traditional forms, which is why the limits that distinguish a prose poem and a short-short are hazy or "blurring," as Fox declares (252), but even within the usual features of narrative fiction, short-short story writers do not often follow any kind of pre-established form in the sense of well constructed characters and a definite plot with conflict, climax, and resolution. Borrowing the term from Jason Sanford, in his essay "Who Wears Short Shorts? Micro Stories and MFA Disgust," the usual procedures are considered "antiquated goods" (screen 1), *tools* no longer used.

3.2. The Short-Short: Sub-Classifications

As already mentioned in the second chapter, tales date from the primordia of literature, even preceding the epic forms, and short fiction can be said to divide into two branches, one following the trends of the romance, with its typed characters and unreal world; the other

following realism with its as-if-real characters and depiction of an actual world. The character was seen as a particular person, not as a type as in the old romance and ancient fables.

In realism, man is contextualized in his physical setting, which is described in detail so that the story seems to be a transcription of real life. In the other trend, the story has no need to seem authentic and real. The names, for example, are not ordinary and common for the time. As an illustration, one may cite the short genre of the beast-fable, an ancient form that continues into the Middle Ages, as seen in Chaucer's "The Nun's Priest's Tale". In such tales, where animals stand in for humans, there is a moral point. In Aesop's "The Ant and the Grasshopper," for example, the ant is industrious, and the grasshopper somewhat of a wastrel. Characters are not animals or types in modern fiction, although they may be in children's literature or genre fiction, like horror and sci-fi.

In the emergence of the short-short story, one may find both of these tendencies. Trends may be perceived even if the examples to be analyzed in the next chapter will not suit perfectly the cluster of features that will be suggested for each sub-genre of the short-short. Shapard and Thomas have recently attempted to sub-classify the genre and, accordingly, have made a few distinctions between the two new sub-genres.

> Stories of only a page or two seemed to us different not only in length but in nature; they evoked a single moment, or an idea, whereas a five-page story, however experimental, was more akin to the traditional short story. Calling on the Wisdom of Solomon, we split the child (*sudden fiction*) [short-short story] into two new children. The longer story became "*new*" *sudden fiction*, while the shorter became *flash*, named by James Thomas. (Shapard and Thomas, New Sudden Fiction 15, italics in original)

Granted that, writers and critics have decided that a *"new" sudden fiction* must be between one to five pages or 1,000 – 2,000 words and the minimum for a *flash fiction* is a third of a

page or 250 words, and its maximum length is 750 words – the same as Hemingway's classic "A Very Short Story."

In flash fictions, characters are introduced very informally, without preliminaries, and they are usually not named. The diction is colloquial (in this aspect, following the Chekhovian model, although more so, with obscenities, etc.). A good dose of humor, the ascetically short length, and a de-realization in the perception of current facts, with the fantastic often presented as commonplace, are the major characteristics of the flash fiction. New sudden fictions, by contrast are less radical, although also experimental. It could be said the flash fiction developed from the new sudden fiction, which is itself more akin to the modern short story, especially the Chekhovian one. In other words, the short-short derives indirectly from, or is an evolution of the Chekhovian short story. One may think of these features as forming a cluster, all of which need not occur in every particular example.

As seen in Chapter Two, Chekhov was the first writer to free himself "from the literary conventions of the highly plotted and formalized story [which] marked the beginnings of a new or 'modern' kind of short fiction that combined the specific detail of realism with the poetic lyricism of romanticism" (May, Chekhov 199). The basic characteristics of this modern kind of short fiction,

> this new hybrid form, are: character as mood rather than as either symbolic projection or realistic depiction; story as minimal lyricized sketch rather than as elaborately plotted tale; atmosphere as an ambiguous mixture of both external details and psychic projections; and a basic impressionistic apprehension of reality itself as a function of perspectival point of view. The ultimate result of these characteristics is the modernist and postmodernist focus on reality itself as a fictional construct and the contemporary trend to make

> fictional assumptions and techniques both the subject matter and theme of the novel and the short story. (May, Chekhov 199)

I would argue that the characteristics that May here delineates are basically the same as those found in the contemporary short-short. In postmodernist fiction, reality is seen as "a fictional construct," a main feature of the short-short. There is also the "contemporary trend" of making the writing itself the theme or subject matter of the short-short. As an illustration, one may cite Robert Coover's flash fiction titled "A Sudden Story." In this story as in other examples, rather than presenting itself as if it were real, "a mimetic mirroring of external reality – postmodernist fiction makes its own artistic conventions and devices the subject of the story as well as its theme" (May, Chekhov 215). Coover's short-short is only 193-word long and so may be transcribed in full:

> Once upon a time, suddenly, while it still could, the story began. For the hero, setting forth, there was of course nothing sudden about it, neither about the setting forth, which he'd spent his entire lifetime anticipating, nor about any conceivable endings, which seemed, like the horizon, to be always somewhere else. For the dragon, however, who was stupid, everything was sudden. He was suddenly hungry and then he was suddenly eating something. Always, it was like the first time. Then, all of a sudden, he'd remember having eaten something like that before: a certain familiar sourness… And, just as suddenly, he'd forget. The hero, coming suddenly upon the dragon (he'd been trekking for years through enchanted forests, endless deserts, cities carbonized by dragon-breath, for him suddenly was not exactly the word), found himself envying, as he drew his sword (a possible ending had just loomed up before him, as though the horizon had, with the desperate illusion of suddenness, tipped), the dragon's tenseless freedom. Freedom? The dragon might have

> asked, had he not been so stupid, chewing over meanwhile the sudden familiar sourness (a memory…?) on his breath. From what? (Forgotten.) [Shapard and Thomas, Sudden Fiction vii]

In this story, which makes no pretense to realism; indeed, it has features of the fairy tale (The "once upon a time" beginning, the presence of a dragon), and seems to be a metafictional story, showing how narrative art explains itself. Literary language need not be a means for something else, a tool used in substitution for something that is missing at the moment (May, Chekhov 215). The short-short narrative is itself an object of study.

> If reality is a fictional construct and the writer wishes to focus on the nature of reality, then he has little choice but to focus on the nature of art and fiction-making itself. If reality is a fiction, an artistic construct, then art perhaps provides the only means to experience reality. (May, Chekhov 208)

Moreover, it is worthwhile mentioning a Danish attempt to classify the new genre short-short (found in the afterword to an anthology of short prose fiction), wherein the short-shorts are presented as a generic field because, as the editors aver (Mose 83), "one of the most important characteristics of short prose is that it integrates and/or contrasts stylistic features and linguistic modes from many different literary genres without ever adhering 100 per cent to one single convention" (Brixvold and Jørgensen, qtd. in Mose 83).

In the following table by Brixvold and Jørgensen, the generic field shows an increase in the fictional elements if read from the bottom up:

	tale	
fairy tale / fable		*novelle* (Danish novella) / "short story"
allegory		prose poem
causerie		lyrical poem
essay		sketch

report private note

document (Mose 83)

One might assert that the short-short story, especially the flash fiction would be placed higher even than the tale, with its fictional and metafictional elements.

3.3. No Limits for the Short-Short Story

If the limits and boundaries that settle the borders of this new genre still seem rather blurred, that is also a characteristic of postmodernism, within which the new genre emerged. As argued in the previous section, the short-short is a hybrid genre which presents characteristics from the short story, journalism, and the lyric poem. It is a kind of *bricolage*, "a literary piece created from diverse resources," and pastiche, "a literary piece consisting wholly or chiefly of motifs or techniques borrowed from one or more sources."[1] As seen before, the only real limits seem to be length.

Hortense Calisher, a short-short story writer, states about the form of short-shorts: "I'm not much for limiting statements on the technique or category of anything. All these do is limit – and sooner or later somebody will come along and defy that, or bypass what supposedly couldn't be" (Shapard and Thomas, Sudden Fiction 250). Yet, what Calisher is considering here is particular prose fiction, because some poetic genres have defined formal rules as constraints for their forms.

[1] The definitions of "bricolage" and "pastiche" are from *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Retrieved November 20, 2008, from Dictionary.com website: http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/pastiche and http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/bricolage

3.4. Conclusion

This new literary genre has not yet been studied in depth by the academy. Gitte Mose offers an explanation for this neglect. She states that the emerging genre demands a different kind of concentration from that of the short story, and also avers that some authors "have regarded these texts as hack work, exercise or preliminary studies for work on a larger scale, using generic designations like 'drafts,' 'reflections,' and 'experiments,' all underlining their provisional nature"(82).

It is, however, "the exploration of what is still unknown that deserves priority" (screen 2) as Aldo Nemesio says in his article "The Comparative Method and the Study of Literature." Surely, as Pasco suggests, "part of the enjoyment of works which fall on the edge of or between well established generic boundaries comes from their problematic nature as genre" (117). It is also true, as Jason Sanford says in his essay "Who Wears Short Shorts? Micro Stories and MFA Disgust," that

> no matter how excellent and mind-blowing a regular-size short-story might be, it still takes an author several days to write it. In this same time an author can write any number of mediocre short-shorts… [In fact, this is the new genre] writers are embracing… Poetic vision rarely shows up. After all, how can you express vision in 100 words [a good sample of a flash fiction]? … There is no denying that the short-short can be a powerful form of writing… A good flash is so condensed that it borderlines poetry. A good flash engages your mind not only for the short duration of its read, but for a long time after. (screen 1)

And yet, academic neglect will soon come to an end. The two anthologists, Robert Shapard and James Thomas, conducted very recent research, recruiting writers, editors, and

other readers, asking them to rate the best short-shorts they had found so far. The results were that *new suddens*, not the *flashes*, got the most 10s from their readers - *new sudden fictions* were everywhere then, even more than *flash fictions* (Shapard and Thomas, New Sudden Fiction 16-17). It is perhaps not surprising that the less radical form pleases readers better than the unconventional form, for the *new sudden fiction* is more akin to the traditional short-story than the *flash fiction*.

Contemporary genres such as the short-short story, which are not steadfast but are in constant mutation, will never fulfill the prerequisites for a neat classification of generic identity, except insofar as the cluster of features that I have attempted to identify here. The contemporary short-short with its whole mélange of stylistic features, open beginnings and ends, still finds a form of its own even if will always be a hybrid form. We have mentioned its brevity, open beginnings and ends, hybridism with multifaceted sources of influences, and finally its evoking of a single moment or single situation, an impressionistic trait, especially standing out in flash fictions. The short-shorts belong to a generic field where form is never static but always subject to changes.

4 Short-Shorts: Some Examples

Modern writers of short stories sometimes wrote stories with a very limited number of words, but which had what has been called in this thesis a traditional form, i.e. well-constructed characters and plot, with conflict, climax, and resolution. One might cite Tennessee Williams's "Tent Worms", Bernard Malamud's "A Lost Grave," and Ernest Hemingway's "A Very Short Story" as examples. These stories have the brief length but not other features of the contemporary short-shorts discussed in the previous chapter.

In this chapter, I intend to make brief analyses of ten stories, beginning with two traditional short stories mentioned above by two masters of modern American fiction, Hemingway and Malamud, followed by eight short-short stories, including three new sudden fictions, four flash fictions, and one story that seems to hover between the two. For convenience, I have included a plot summary of each story, followed by commentary (The complete texts of each story may be found in the Appendix. Note that the page numbers cited here refer to the collections from which the stories are taken).

1. Ernest Hemingway, "A Very Short Story"

Plot Summary – The story takes place in Italy during World War I. A male character without name, an American in military duty in Italy, and Luz, an American nurse in military duty as well, live a love story in Padua. He is wounded and Luz takes care of him at the hospital. He goes back to the front and Luz writes him many letters. After the cease-fire they decide to get married. They talk it out and he goes back to the States to get a job. Luz would go later. He goes to America on a ship from Genoa and Luz goes to Pordenone to open a hospital (127). There she meets a major from the Italian army and makes love to him. It is the first time she knows an Italian. Luz writes to the American saying she had always loved him but now she understood their relationship had been a very childish one. She still says that she

expected to marry the major in the spring. She never receives a reply from Chicago. She does not get married in the spring, either. Soon after the letter, the American "contracts gonorrhea from a salesgirl… while riding in a taxicab through Lincoln Park" (127).

As can be seen in this plot summary, the story is reported in different settings, with some character development, as well as a well-developed plot, with climax and resolution, in 750 words, or less than two pages, and so one could not therefore call it a flash fiction – a story that evokes a single moment.

In the first paragraph, the two main characters are introduced, and in the second paragraph, background information about them is provided. Now we understand that Luz is a nurse who has taken care of the unnamed American soldier or officer (his rank is not mentioned), when he was wounded in war and hospitalized in Padua. Their affair is revealed at this point, as well. In the third paragraph, we are informed about their intention of getting married. All this background information is necessary for the plot to make sense. The three first paragraphs form a sort of introduction, with the narrative beginning in paragraph four. The characters are quickly comprehensible but are individuals, not types. In paragraph four, the soldier goes back to the front and writes Luz some letters. In paragraph five, a conflict is introduced – a quarrel between the couple, who say goodbye in Milan. The soldier leaves for Genoa in order to board a ship to America and she goes back to Pordenone. The final scene of bathos takes place in America. It is clear to the reader from place names, etc. that most of the setting is in Italy and the historical context is World War I, from textual cues, such as "it got dark and the searchlights came out" (126), and the mention of a battalion of *Arditi*, elite storm troops quartered in Pordenone, from World War I.

What is the relation of the setting to the action of the story? It is the fact that soldiers are very lonely, afraid, and insecure, and therefore they need affection and love when abroad and in a warlike atmosphere. Therefore, if someone shows them affection, there is a strong

chance that they will immediately fall in love. Soldiers are not selective at this time; and the outcome of this sort of relationship may not be a long-lasting one. The mood of war is perceived right away. The setting has an integral connection with the action. As Bausch & Cassill observe, "The meaning and emotional impact of [the] story heavily depend[s] on the working out of the plot" (Bausch and Cassill xxi).

It is typical of Hemingway's short stories to present "a seemingly simple external situation in such a way as to suggest emotional complexities." Hemingway, like Chekhov, limit radically "the authorial comment" and depend "on situation, a situation often so limited, with so much of what we usually expect in narrative left out, that all we have is… description". The present story allows "the bare situation to express a complex emotional dilemma" (May, Chekhov 204). The action arises "from the [two] characters depicted in the story and their relation to each other" (Bausch and Cassill xxi). The closure of the story would be happier if Luz had not made love to the Italian major, and had remained faithful to the American and married him, her first love. The reader probably expects a happy end rather than the surprising one offered by the author, but Luz has a conflict with her loneliness, lack of love and affection, and gives in to an adventurous affair. This second and main conflict "arises from an opposition between [Luz] and her environment" (Bausch and Cassill xxii) – all her needs and a handsome Italian major from a battalion of Arditi quartered in Pordenone. The modern reader can be sympathetic to the conflict and its circumstances, although at the time of the story, Luz might have been seen as immoral. All in all, the suggested theme, love affairs during wartime, is chiefly accomplished by the outcome of the action: the couple does not end up together, war love affairs are rarely long-lasting relationships.

2. Bernard Malamud, "A Lost Grave"

Plot Summary – Mr. Hecht wakes up one night with the rain dropping on his windows. He had lost his ex-wife, Celia, many years before and for a long time has not remembered her.

Now, all of a sudden, the thought of Celia buried in a wet tomb bothers him. Why not go there and cover her with a plastic sheet? In spite of the fact they had been separated for many years when she died, he was the one who took care of the funeral and promised to look after the grave plot once the burial was finished. Hecht goes to the cemetery in search of Celia's tomb but the visit is in vain. He does not have enough information: any exact dates or grave plots. First, he talks to a young lady who searches for it in a computer but does not succeed; second, he is introduced to Mr. Goodman, who cannot decipher the mystery, either, but promises to "institute a careful research" (221). Mr. Hecht himself tries to remember something that might help the investigation. He goes back to the cemetery but cannot recall anything. Another month goes by and finally the cemetery calls him. Mr. Goodman says that they tracked Celia and found out that she was buried with a gentleman named Kaplan. She lived the last years of her life with him after she left Mr. Hecht. After her funeral, Kaplan got a court order and transferred Celia's remains to a different grave. Hecht was very disappointed, but he was informed he had an empty grave he could use whenever he wanted. Therefore, that was not the problem. Instead, he was shocked by the story. "Yet whenever he felt like telling it to someone he knew, or had just met, he wasn't sure he wanted to" (223).

Hecht and the deceased Celia, the main characters, are introduced in the first paragraph through an informal account of a bad night. The author provides little background information on Hecht and little on Celia, solely when it is necessary. For instance, "now, though Hecht had been more or less in business all his life, he kept few personal papers, …[nevertheless, he could not] establish Celia's present whereabouts…" (219). Also, on Celia: "My wife wasn't the most stable woman. She left me twice and disappeared for months… Once she threatened to take her life, though eventually she didn't. In the end she died of a normal sickness, not cancer…" (221). Here, a description of Celia's personality is provided to indirectly explain the reason for the separation. The characters are quickly made

comprehensible, although they are not such familiar types. The initial conflict, first as a dream, then in actuality, that Hecht cannot locate Celia's grave or plot in the cemetery, is used as a jumping-off place for the action of the whole story.

A Jewish cemetery, Mount Jereboam, is almost entirely the setting of the story and it has an integral connection with the action. At the resolution point, when a third character, Mr. Goodman, the director of the cemetery, calls Hecht, he wishes him happy "Rosh Hashanah," the Jewish New Year. The setting is well indicated but without a detailed description. The author assumes "that readers would be familiar with the significant qualities to be found in this setting" (Bausch and Cassill xxi). The action of the plot arises from the initial conflict and it is resolved when the mystery is cleared up: Celia's remains had been transferred from Hecht's grave to Celia's last lover's tomb. The outcome of the plot is plausible enough and the ending is not necessarily surprising since Mr. Goodman says that in his twenty-eight years of work at the cemetery he had never lost a single grave. Celia's background has actions that took place before the narrative had begun. Those actions are decisive to the understanding of the plot. Celia, after the separation from Hecht, "lived for a short time with some guy she [had] met somewhere" (221). Hecht's insistence on finding Celia's grave is necessary to move the plot along. Hecht's insistence contrasts with Mr. Goodman's secretary's lack of perseverance. She gives up her search for the lost grave right away and hands the case over to Mr. Goodman. The secretary is the only passive character in the story, a minor one. The prevailing point of view is Hecht's. The story has astounded him and he does not want to tell it to anybody. The style and diction are in the mode of traditional short fiction, distinct from the contemporary short-short. The narrator's point of view brings forth a sense of immediacy and an illusion of reality. May's general view of Malamud's stories is well expressed in the following lines:

> Malamud's short stories are often [close] to the oral tradition of parable… One also realizes that his short stories reflect [a] tight symbolic structure and [an] ironic point of view… Malamud's stories move inevitably toward a conclusion in which complex moral dilemmas are not so much resolved as they are frozen in a symbolic final epiphany or ironic gesture. His characters are always caught in what might be called the demand for sympathy and responsibility. But the moral/aesthetic configuration of his stories is such that the reader is not permitted the luxury of an easy moral judgment… [After all], the bitter-sweet conclusion of most of Malamud's tales are typical of his Chekhovian refusal to give in to either sentimentality or condescension. (May, Chekhov 212-13)

One might say that the story makes a general statement about life, and it can be stated in the form of a proverb: "Let sleeping dogs lie". It is better not to revisit or restart old conflicts. It seems Hecht and Celia's relationship was conflictual: "he hadn't thought of her in too many years to be comfortable about" (219). Perhaps, there is also something positive about it: Hecht "had lost a wife but was no longer a widower" (223). Also, he "gained an empty grave for future use" (223).

The following examples are contemporary short-shorts, and the differences from the previous two stories that have been summarized will hopefully become apparent.

3. Teolinda Gersão, "The Red Fox Fur Coat" (translated from the Portuguese)

Plot summary - A humble bank clerk is strolling around town after work when suddenly she finds herself before a shop window and a red fox fur coat. The shop was closed but she comes back next day at lunch-time and tries on the coat. It fits her perfectly; suits her beautifully. Our main character becomes obstinate concerning the purchase of the item. However, it cost "five times more than she could afford" (35). Then she decides to spread out the payment and sacrifice her holidays and part of the money she had saved for a car loan, eat

less and use less heating. Notwithstanding she would be able to have the coat only after the third installment would be paid. Meanwhile she dreamed and thought all the time about it. She stopped by the shop everyday to see it. After a while, as deeper and deeper her wishes and drives become, she starts to feel and act like an animal, with a much more accurate sense of smell and hearing and craving desperate for raw meat. As soon as she gets the coat at the shop, she can hardly get in the car and drive to the nearest forest where she leaps from the car with her four feet on the ground, waives her tail and shakes her animal body sniffing the air joyfully and then delving into the depths of the forest.

The main character is introduced in the first line of the story. The author provides no background information on the unnamed character. We just know that she is "a humble bank clerk" and therefore cannot afford the expensive fur coat. Further background information on the main character would in fact be unnecessary in the development of the plot. We are made aware of the identity conflict in the personality of the main character at the real beginning of the story when the author hints that after the bank clerk sees the red fox fur coat for the first time and goes home to sleep, she sleeps very little and awakes "feeling troubled and slightly feverish" (34). This identity conflict is "used as a jumping-off place for the present action of the story" and "the outcome of the plot [is] consistent with the actions that initiated it" (Bausch and Cassill xxi). In fact, the woman is so obsessed with the fox fur coat that she ends up turning into an actual fox, a fantastic ending.

The author's idea of a metamorphosis, the main character turning into a fox, suggests a Kafka story or perhaps the werewolf legend. There are not many details about the setting and the focus is all on the main character whose personality is not important. Furthermore, there is no real expansion or development throughout the story but simply "an impulse toward concentration" – i.e. concentration on the main character. According to May, "this focusing of all forces on a single point is the prerequisite for all mythical thinking and mythical

formulation" (May, The Nature 139), the basis for the primal narrative, the germ of the short-short story.

4. Frederick A. Paola, "The Wine Doctor"

Plot Summary – In August 1930, Dottore Controlaò, a conventional doctor is in his office in Italy when he is taken by surprise by an unexpected visit from Ezio Delli Castelli, "the wine doctor of Nocera Terinese" (137), an oenopath, "a practitioner of the unique healing art of oenopathy" (137). Ezio Delli Castelli had had an appointment with Dottore Controlaò a month before and the doctor had requested a chest x-ray due to his complaints of a nagging cough and coughing up small amounts of blood. We understand while reading that Dottore Controlaò is not very friendly to his patient at first. He called him *Voi*, a pronoun Ezio Delli Castelli disdained and the doctor knew it. Controlaò diagnoses cancer in Castelli's throat and lungs and prescribes morphine. Controlaò pats Castelli's shoulder and holds his hands out before his patient. Now it is Castelli's turn to diagnose Controlaò's disease: "Arthritis deformans," which impresses the conventional doctor. Castelli prescribes white wine from the Verbicaro region to his new patient. They finally shake hands and thank each other, and Controlaò calls Castelli *Lei* - a polite form of "you" better appreciated by the wine doctor.

The action of the plot is closely related to the two characters depicted in the story and their relation to each other (Bausch and Cassill xxi). Throughout the story, we learn that before the beginning of the narrative Castelli had had an appointment with Cotrolaò one month before and the doctor sent his patient to a hospital for a chest x-ray. That is an important piece of information for the decisive end when Controlaò diagnoses the wine doctor's illness as cancer. The conflict of the story is built on the fact that a wine doctor, an oenopath, seeks medical treatment from an allopath, which Doctor Controlaò questions, straightforwardly asking Castelli why he sought help from a conventional doctor instead of an oenopath. Castelli, the oenopath, seeks treatment from an allopath, and likewise, Cotrolaò, the

conventional doctor, consults the wine doctor at the end. The outcome of the conflict and the theme recall the proverb "The shoemaker's son always goes barefoot." This story, like the previous one, may be labeled a new sudden fiction. The environment is presented in some detail and there is careful individual characterization – features that make this story more seemingly conventional than most short-shorts.

5. Barry Callaghan, "The Black Queen"

Plot Summary – Hughes and McCrae, a male couple who have had a long-lasting relationship, live in a rundown neighborhood at a nice colonial house in which they take pride. McCrae has his hair longer than the conventional but it is turning grey. He wears Cuban heels and lacquers his nails. He does all the cooking and drives the car. Hughes is a costume designer. He has a clipped moustache and a very serious look. Hughes and McCrae have not been getting along lately. They seem unsettled by how fast they are aging. The pastime they like the most is stamp collecting. They have a stamp collection worth thousands of dollars. One afternoon, they go downtown to philatelic shops and stop before the window of one when they see this "large and elegant black stamp of Queen Victoria" (199), an expensive, rare stamp. While they are staring at the stamp outside the shop, the fluorescent light catches McCrae's lacquered nails, and Hughes bursts out: "You old queen, I mean why don't you just quit wearing those goddamn Cuban heels, eh? I mean why not?" (199). And then, he walks away and leaves McCrae embarrassed and hurt. Through the rest of the week, they try not to quarrel and are polite to each other. Mother's Day was approaching, with their annual supper for friends. They held this meeting for three other male couples every year and it "often ended bitter-sweetly [leaving] them feeling close, comforting each other" (199).

McCrae spends the whole Sunday preparing the meal. In the evening, when all their guests are already in the house and McCrae is cutting vegetables in the kitchen, he takes "a plastic slipcase out of the knives-and-forks drawer" (200) and finds the dead-letter stamp of

Queen Victoria in the case. He licks the stamp and pastes it on his forehead; takes hold of the tray and steps into the living room where all their guests are sitting round the coffee table. Hughes, astounded, yells, "Oh my God" (200) and stares at the black queen.

The two main characters of the story, Hughes and McCrae are introduced in the first line of the first paragraph and are called "fastidious men" (198). They are introduced along with the setting, their old colonial house, and the neighborhood where they lived. The narrator describes Hughes and McCrae's house an old colonial one, and the neighborhood where they lived in a rundown one. At this point, a racist and xenophobic comment is made about the school located in the area and the foreign children who studied there: "an area of waste overrun by rootless olive-skinned children" (198). Their house was the "remnant of good taste" in the area. Now the reader understands the reason why the narrator calls this couple "fastidious men"; not only were they excessively delicate people but hard to please and critical as well.

In the second paragraph, the narrator depicts the couple in details: "McCrae wore his hair a little too long now that he was going gray, and while Hughes with his clipped moustache seemed to be a serious man intent only on his work, which was costume design, McCrae wore Cuban heels and lacquered his nails" (198). In this same paragraph, the narrator gives the reader a little background information on them. The reader is informed that Hughes and McCrae had met each other ten years before. This piece of information is necessary since the third paragraph will deal with a certain intimacy of the couple; although the characters are not conventional, being a homosexual couple, a minority among marital unions.

The preexisting conflict is presented as early as in the second paragraph. The narrator informs the reader that Hughes did not approve McCrae's Cuban heels and lacquered nails. About those Hughes warned his partner when they had met ten years before: "You keep walking around like that and you'll need a body to keep you from getting poked in the eye"

(198). This preexisting conflict is used as a jumping-off place for the action of the story, when the couple will argue before the philatelic shop window when staring at the black stamp of Queen Victoria (199).

The story's plot is subordinate to the preexisting conflict but the meaning and emotional impact of the story depends on its working out. Who is the black queen? The stamp on McCrae's forehead or McCrae himself? Queen is a slang term for homosexual, especially a flamboyantly campy one, like McCrae. The thematic statement at the end of the story is accomplished chiefly by the outcome of the final action, an ironic closure, when McCrae, accused of being an "old queen" defiantly wears another old queen on his forehead, and the outcome becomes consistent with the action that initiated it.

Since it is a queer short-short, the narrator/author may be protecting himself by telling the story in third person. Although queer fiction is a new development in contemporary literature, hints and suggestions of homosexual relationships may be found in 19th century American literature, as, for example, in Twain's Jim and Huck Finn, or Cooper's Natty Bumpo and Chingachook, who by fleeing bourgeois domestic arrangements (respectability for Huck and slavery for Jim, the woods versus the decadent town for Natty and his Indian companion) suggest an alternative male life-style.

This super-masculine world of male couples, however, need not be the only queer alternative. In the nineteenth century American short story writer Bret Hart's "Uncle Jim and Uncle Billy," for example,

> it is shown that men can create a home without women and without all the appurtenances of bourgeois domestic establishments. Thus, he [Harte] is not transcending domestic ideology but transforming it and creating an alternative, same-sex domesticity that problematizes and subverts the essentialism of Victorian domesticity's gender roles and ideals… At the same time, Harte

> shows that a marriage and marital devotion and fidelity are not necessarily limited to cross-sex couples. (Nissen 188)

In "The Black Queen," Callaghan likewise portrays a same-sex liaison, Hughes and McCrae's, as steady and as alternative as Uncle Jim and Uncle Billy's. Concerning mode, the sadness, the aging of the couple in Callaghan's short-short, the decay of their youthfulness, counterbalances the ironic closure.

The next four examples are flash fictions.

6. David Galef, "My Date with Neanderthal Woman" (awarded the Mona Schreiber Prize for Humorous Fiction and Non-Fiction in 2003).

Plot Summary – Glena is a Neanderthal who lives in a cave in the woods. Robert is a *Homo Sapiens* who lives in the city, but the story supposedly takes place in modern times. Robert hires the service of TransWorld Dating Agency to set up a rendezvous with Glena. He is tired of modern women. The Neanderthal woman has "a more natural sense of time than those of us dominated by Rolexes and cell phones" (109); "I'd grown tired of modern women and their endless language games" (110); "God, I hate all the introductory explanations of a first date – which is why I was so happy none of that mattered to Glena" (110). The date works out wonderfully in spite of the unavoidable differences. Robert, character and narrator, intends to solve them even though they are separated by "millennia."

The narrator, Robert, introduces himself and Glena at the beginning of the story, supposedly familiar "types:" Glena, the Neanderthal woman and Robert, the modern *Homo Sapiens.* The anthropological typing makes the preposterousness of the story – that prehistoric people live in modern times – an acceptable fiction to the reader. The only background information is the fact that the date was arranged by TransWorld Dating Agency, obviously fictional. The sole "smooth" conflict, around which the whole story develops, is the incompatible differences between the two characters – an opposition between their life-styles

and environments. These differences are presented from beginning to end and are devices used by the author "to heighten the comic effect of the story" (Bausch and Cassill xxiii). When Robert takes Glena out for dinner at "Chez Asperge, a French-fusion-vegan restaurant," we learn that it is not far from the woods where Glena's cave is found.

Again, the relation between the two characters, their radical differences and possible arising of conflicts are the main action of the plot. The first-person narration adds a sense of actuality to this flash fiction, despite the use of "exaggerations" and "distortions of reality;" all "have been used to shape the… story to a particular purpose" (Bausch and Cassill xxiii), to the casual treatment of the unreal premise. The whole story can be summed up in the form of the saying: "opposites attract" (with a possible allegory on interracial dating). In spite of the seemingly overwhelming differences, Robert is still attracted to Glena. He finds her sexy and beautiful, and so the short-short appeals to a romantic sensibility. It stirs up a desire that life should be different (Bausch and Cassill xxiii).

This short-short may be called a flash fiction because of its minuscule size, 752 words, approximately two pages, and because it evokes a single moment and a single idea. The narrative tone is humorous, a feature of many flash fictions. The text resembles an anecdote, which is one of the sub-classifications of the short-shorts proposed by Stephen Minot in the "Afterwords" of Shapard and Thomas's *Sudden Fiction* (236). The theme of the story recalls what has been said about the "the field of research for the short story. [It] is the primitive, antisocial world of the unconscious, and the material of its analysis are not manners, but dreams" (May, The Nature 133).

7. Raymond Carver, "Popular Mechanics"

Plot Summary – It is probably spring because the snow is melting and the weather a little warmer. Nevertheless, it is darker on the inside of a house. A husband and a wife are in the midst of an argument while the husband is packing to leave her behind. Meanwhile, the

husband remembers their baby who was being held by the mother. The husband wants to take the baby and the wife wants to keep it. Each one of them firmly takes hold of an arm of the baby and pulls hard. That is how "the issue was decided" (69).

The first description, the setting, is of the weather, the surroundings of the house where the whole story takes place, and finally the internal atmosphere of the building; which was as dark as the outside weather. Then, two characters are introduced. The author does not provide background information for the characters at any point in the story. Even their names are not provided, but right away we learn that a serious marital quarrel is underway, which is the sole action of the story. The reader is already made aware of the conflict in the second paragraph, when the husband is introduced packing his suitcase in the bedroom to leave home. The wife comes to the door and the quarrel takes over the scene. The setting is exploited wisely and enhances the mood of the short-short. When the marital argument moves from the bedroom to the kitchen with a third character in the scene, the baby, the wife stands behind the stove while the husband leans over to crab the baby and knocks down a flowerpot, a sense of tightness and compression is felt. "The kitchen window gave no light," adds the narrator.

The story's atmosphere gets darker and tenser. There is no way out of the strife. It is near the end of the story and there is no resolution. When the reader approaches the end of the short-short, a working out of the plot is expected, but it depends on the action of the preexisting conflict, which does not seem to have an end. The story is seen as a picture of a moment, an impression of the narrator, and is subordinated to the two main active characters and their relation to each other; and a third, passive character, the baby, who seems more like a prop.

The story is very brief, 498 words, less than two pages. Ninety percent of the short-short is composed of dialogue. The closure would obviously be so interesting if a solution to

the argument had been found. The end is left to the imagination of the reader. The two active characters resemble types; they stand in for a familiar domestic scene, a husband-wife argument and a threat to leave home. The narrator's role is limited; if the third-person narration had been first-person, the short-short would have gained more *vraisemblance* and the effect might have been lost. If the story were to be summed up in the form of a maxim, it might be: "After marriage, husband and wife become two sides of a coin; they just can't face each other." And no one wants to interfere in their quarrel – even the narrator of the story. The title is not only ironic but darkly comic. The resolution also suggests the Biblical story of Solomon the judge and the two women arguing over who is the real mother of the baby, with the prospect of the baby being literally divided in half here becoming horribly real.

May suggests that perhaps Carver is the closest contemporary short story writer to Chekhov, as both of them created "an illusion of inner reality by focusing on external details only… [They found] an event that … expressed properly … by the … [wise] choice of relevant details … [would] embody the complexity of the inner state" (May, Chekhov 202).

8. Don Shea, "Jumper Down"

Plot Summary – Henry is a paramedic who works for a university hospital in New York City with a team that specializes in rescuing "jumpers" – suicides who are about or have already jumped from buildings, bridges, and other locations. Henry is retiring and this is his last day of work. The rescuing team of paramedics throws him a party at the hospital when suddenly a call comes in: "Jumper up on the Brooklyn Bridge" (18). Our narrator is not Henry but another paramedic. Henry had always been excellent with calls "jumper up," that is, someone ready to commit suicide. When the call was "jumper down," anyone from the team could go; it did not matter. When the team got this call in the middle of the party, everybody agreed it was fate since it was Henry's last day of work. The jumper was not on the Manhattan side of the Brooklyn Bridge, which is over water, but on the Brooklyn side, over

land. By the time the rescuing team got there, the police had already spotted some light on the potential suicide, who looked relaxed. As soon as Henry was about ready to climb up the bridge and approach the suicide, the latter jumped. His jump the narrator describes as a circus act: “Two half gainers and a backflip” (18), under the spotlights from the police. The narrator and Henry run to the man who was still alive. His eyes are open and since hearing is the last sense to go, Henry whispers in his ear: “That jump was fucking *magnificent!* ” (19) At first, the narrator thought the comment improper and insensitive, but after a few days of meditation on the occasion, he understood that words of admonition would hardly suit the situation since the suicide had likely been rejected and suffered throughout his life. The narrator finally saw Henry’s words as an attempt to bring some comfort, recognition and congratulations to a human being in his last minutes of life.

The main character, Henry, is introduced in the first line of the story. He is introduced very informally and colloquially. Also in the first line (condensation), the narrator, a minor character along with Big John and the suicide, gives some background information on Henry: a “jumper up expert – had been for years” (17). That is very important because the whole story will center on a supposed jumper up, who will actually become a jumper down, as the title suggests. Another important piece of background information is the fact that Henry, a jumper up specialist, was retiring, and the story takes place on his last day of work, during a farewell party, which is clear by the fourth paragraph. The characters are made quickly comprehensible in spite of the fact they are not familiar types, due to the extreme brevity of the flash fiction.

The setting is the city of New York, at the university hospital and the Brooklyn Bridge. Something interesting and significant in the setting of the story is the curiosity that the Brooklyn Bridge has a side that is over land and a side that is over water. We are informed about that in the middle of the story, in the sixth paragraph. It is an essential piece of

information since the suicide jumps onto land and therefore dies. The setting is not vividly represented, nor is there need for detailed descriptions since what the reader needs to know is provided by it. As New York is known worldwide and a hospital is a place that anyone has been at least once in life, the author may assume "that readers would be familiar with the significant qualities to be found" (Bausch and Cassill xxi) at those locations. The bridge scene enhances and controls the mood of the story. It helps "to bring out the feelings [and] emotions experienced by" (Bausch and Cassill xxi) Henry and the narrator. The story is vivid in its first-person narration. And we learn something about the narrator, that he is astonished at Henry's attitude of complimenting the suicide on his "magnificent" dive or jump.

"The meaning and emotional impact of this story heavily depend on the working out of the plot" (Bausch and Cassill xxi). The action of this plot arises from the fact Henry is a specialist in "jumper up" calls, and on his last day of work the team receives a jumper-up call which ends up with the jumper down. The outcome of the plot, however, is not consistent with the initial information – that Henry is a jumper up expert. The jumper is down, but Henry, perhaps because it is his last case, insists on taking it, so the ending is surprising because what should naturally be condemned is unexpectedly complimented. What does not seem plausible at first is revealed as something quite comprehensible. The plot would be banal and predictable if the suicide had not jumped down but instead had been talked into not jumping at all. The plot is moved along by the jumper-up call, the interruption of the farewell party, and the consequent response of Henry to the rescuing mission. Henry is the jumper-up expert and that is what motivates him.

In flash fictions generally, there is, as in Carver's and Galef's stories, not enough time to develop characters, so that the characters are not individualized but are there to make the plot move forward. For example, Henry is the jumper up expert, the suicide the necessary suicide, the narrator the necessary commenter on the action. All are active, moving the plot

forward. There is no character development; Henry only makes an unexpected decision, which becomes possible because of the unusual circumstances. There is no conflict but a climax, the singular death of the suicide. The reader might be at first shocked at his words, but then is given time to take a deep breath and assess the situation, after which the final words seem weirdly appropriate. The narration is confined to a single point of view in spite of the fact the narrator changes his opinion regarding Henry's words to the suicide. The narrator's point of view is neutral concerning the subject of suicide. He does not utter any value judgment or moral opinion on the topic.

The story might remind the reader of the maxim "Look before you leap." The reason for the remark is because the narrator says that once the suicide was on the ground "he looked somewhat surprised by what he had done to himself" (19). However, the proverb does not provide a complete statement of the story. Suicide is a common enough theme in literature, but the black humor of flash fiction gives it a new twist.

9. H.E. Francis, "Sitting"

Plot Summary – One morning, a gentleman finds a couple sitting on the front steps of his house. Throughout the day, he often looks through the window and sees the couple hardly moves. Time passes and he wonders whether they eat, sleep, and perform their daily necessities. The next-door neighbors call to inquire who those people are and what they are doing there. After a few days, neighbors farther down the street pass by the house, see the couple, and then call to ask the same questions. The couple remains quiet and motionless. Suddenly, the owner of the house starts to get calls from all over the city. Now everybody knows about a couple sitting in front of the gentleman's house. At this point, he attempts to contact the couple, and when they do not respond, he threatens them, saying he will call the police. They say nothing and look indifferent. The police come and take them away. As the jails are full, however, they are back in the next morning. The gentleman argues with the

police, who return and again remove the pair. When the gentleman looks out the next morning, however, the man and woman are once more sitting on his front steps. Years and years go by. The gentleman wonders how they do not freeze to death during the long winters, but in the end it is the gentleman who dies. As he has no relatives, his house goes to the city. The man and woman still do not move from the front steps of the house. When the city authorities threaten to remove them, neighbors and other citizens sue the city, arguing that after sitting there for so many years, the couple has a right to the house. "The petitioners won" (102). The man and woman move into the house. The next morning, there are strangers, men and women, "sitting on front steps all over the city" (102).

The author introduces the three main characters informally in the first line. The author provides no background information for the main characters. The story is really brief, a few more lines than a page, 358 words. This information is unnecessary since the characters are plot movers more than as-if-real people. However, the characters are quickly comprehensible because of the clear depiction of the action that smoothly moves along and unravels the comic plot. None of the characters have names. The single conflict is introduced in the same first line the three main characters are also introduced. A couple of strangers decide to sit on the front steps of this man's house and never leave that spot. The conflict starts with the beginning of the story; there is no preexisting conflict. The setting is quite scanty: the outside of the house and the street where it is situated. We are not informed about the details of this setting; except the front of the house had steps and the street was long since there were other neighbors. The setting is merely implied by the way in which events unfold. Therefore, there is a city that has a post office, a police station, and a court, for there is a mailman, police officers and the filing of a lawsuit, familiar institutions to be found in a city.

As in all flash-fictions, the plot is the most important thing: "The meaning and emotional impact of this story heavily depend on the working out of the plot" (Bausch and

Cassill xxi). The action of the plot arises from the relation, or lack of it, of the couple who sits on the front steps to the owner of the house. This gentleman is not happy with the presence of the strangers, and at first, neither are his neighbors, and therefore, the outcome of the plot is not consistent with the actions that initiated it. There is, as usual, a surprise, because the gentleman's neighbors are also bothered by the presence of the strangers at the beginning of the story; nevertheless, at the end they file a lawsuit in order for the strangers to take over the house. Yet, the ending is plausible because there is a reversal, or a change in direction of the plot line – the owner of the house dies and has no relatives to inherit his assets. If the owner did not die and the strangers did not take over the house, the story would not be humorous but more like Melville's story "Bartleby, the Scrivener," where that archetypal squatter, Bartleby, is hauled away to prison and dies.

Paradoxically, the insistence on the strangers' stasis, their refusal to move or even justify their not moving, moves the plot along. The qualities of the strangers who sit are perseverance and steadiness. As the proverb suggests, actions speak louder than words or, here, eloquently, non-action. The other main character, the owner of the house, has an important quality – curiosity. He wonders about the life story of the strangers, whether they eat, sleep, etc. These three main characters can be seen as types by their actions. All the three main characters are active; as well as the police officer and the neighbors, minor characters. Only the neighbors, taken as a collective group, change and the story's meaning depends on that reversal. The strangers, and perhaps the whole story, may be read as an allegory of the legal prescription called *Usucaption*, defined by Webster's as "the acquisition of the title or right to property by the uninterrupted possession of it for a certain term prescribed by law." The story is conditioned by the time the strangers spend on the steps of the house.

The author has not confined the story to a single point of view, which can be seen by the point of view of the strangers and as well as the owner's. The theme, Usucaption, is

accomplished chiefly by the outcome of the action – the neighbors file a Prescription lawsuit, and the strangers acquire the right to property of the house. The legal theme is traditional, especially in the countries where the Common Law is adopted. Once the rule of precedent is created, any other supplicant can file a petition utilizing that decision as jurisprudence to support his / her claim if the case has similar issues or facts.

The last sentence, "In the morning strange men and women were sitting on front steps all over the city" is the one that gives a strong pinch of humor, a staple of flash fiction. If the couple of strangers had lost the lawsuit, the story would not be comic. Another maxim might be relevant here, the Chinese saying "The man who removes a mountain begins by carrying away small stones."

10. John L'Heureux, "The Anatomy of Desire." This last example might be classified as either new sudden or flash fiction.

Plot Summary - Hanley is a war ex-combatant whose skin has "been stripped off by the enemy" (117). They spared only his face and genitals. He is at a vets' hospital being looked after by a nurse called the saint. He is alive just because of a new medication – a blood retardant. All in all, as Hanley wanted to be possessed and loved and was so despised by everybody, even his family, the saint caresses him and manifests her affection in every way. Nonetheless, that is not enough for Hanley and then they make love. And yet Hanley is not satisfied; his thirst and desire for possession is so great, the saint lets him strip off her skin and then he puts it on, but he is still not fulfilled. He sees "there can be no possession, there is only desire" (121). This story is intertwined with Hanley's stripping off during war. Hanley had been an infiltrator and had to be punished. The stripping off of Hanley's skin was done by this foreign general who after the war becomes the mayor of his country's capital city and later on runs for senator. After war was over, he feels very guilty and starts to have nightmares about Hanley. He also fears an investigation of his previous life and career and is

afraid that would cause damages to his new political life. Scenes of Hanley's previous relation with the general and the general's subsequent psychological conflict caused by what he had done to Hanley are interconnected with scenes from the saint's relationship with Hanley. Some events that happened between Hanley and the general are repeated exactly the same between the saint and Hanley. The narration is *ipsissima verba* the same. For instance, the stripping off of Hanley's skin and the stripping off of the saint's skin. The strippers were different. The first one was the general and Hanley the victim. The second one was Hanley and the saint the victim. Nevertheless, some actions, procedures and manners are repeated literally. The general kissed Hanley

> on the brown and on the cheek and finally on the mouth. He gazed deep and long into Hanley's eyes until he saw his own reflection there looking back. He traced the lines of Hanley's eyebrows, gently, with the tip of his index finger. "Such a beautiful face", he said in his own language. He pressed his palms lightly against Hanley's forehead, against his cheekbones, his jaw. With his little finger he memorized the shape of Hanley's lips… (Shapard and Thomas, Sudden Fiction 118)

It seems the perversions in both cases were very similar, almost equal. The need to be inside someone, infiltrate the other, the identification with and the desire to be the other, to be possessed by him / her, and the idolatry, the wish to "wear" the other. The only difference in both cases of our story is that homosexual desire and acts are suggested between the general and Hanley. During the stripping off of Hanley by the general, at the end the narrator says "afterward he [the general] did some things down below" (118). The whole scene suggests such an intimacy that only sex would fulfill the desires aroused. And as the scene is repeated twice, it is important to stress that there was sex between the saint and Hanley. "And so they [Hanley and the saint] made love…" (119).

This example might be regarded as somewhere between the new sudden fiction and the flash fiction, as it shares features of both types. This is from the first collection of short-shorts from the eighties, which "blurs the lines between fantasy and reality" (May, Chekhov 206). Characteristic of postmodernism, it has a "focus on reality itself as a fictional construct" (199). It is a good illustration of the dehumanization and deformation of reality. Regarding length, five pages, it may be considered a new sudden fiction. We see no humor or comic scenes in it, but rather a touch of fantastic, surreal, horror, which is often found in flash fictions.

Two of the three main characters of the story are introduced in what seems to be the first part of the short-short, since there is a division established by the author by breaks in the text. Hanley is introduced in the first line and the saint a few lines below. The general, the third main character, is introduced in the beginning of the second part, which, coincidently, is the second page as well. All the three main characters are introduced informally, colloquially – a characteristic of the short-shorts. Characters are constructed according to the mood of the story and to serve a specific purpose. The narrator provides background information for Hanley that amounts, basically, to half of the plot of the story – the stripping off of his skin. Likewise, all we know about the general's past is his active role in the stripping off. Regarding the saint, no background information is provided, which would be redundant anyway. All those three characters are made quickly comprehensible; the gay general and the man without a skin are not familiar types, although the saint is. A preexisting conflict, Hanley living in a vets' hospital without skin, is used as a jumping-off place for the unraveling of the plot. We are made aware of it in the first line of the text. The saint is then introduced as the closest nurse to Hanley. Solely the strictly necessary information about the setting is provided. And the objective is to enhance the mood of horror. The camp was surrounded by barbed wire; the hospital had long corridors that were stained by Hanley's bloody steps along

their floor, for example, which are the only specific details about the setting, but a hospital and a camp near a battlefield can easily be pictured by the reader. The settings have integral connections with the actions, which could not take place meaningfully in other settings.

The meaning and emotional impact of this story do not heavily depend on the working out of the plot, which is subordinate to the mood. The action arises from the relation among the three main characters. The chain of events is intertwined, but the outcome is not consistent with the action that initiated it. Hanley wanted to be loved and possessed, and so a happy ending might be expected. In fact, he is finally loved and possessed, and even gets a new skin. Nevertheless, he does not end up happy but weeping of sadness. He finds out, "staring deep into the green and loving eyes of the saint … that there can be no possession, there is only desire" (121). Yet, the surprise ending is plausible. Hanley's desire to be loved and possessed, his dream of being enveloped by someone else, having a new skin, moves the plot along.

The saint may be considered a type since she is so unconditionally giving her love away, as would be expected of a saint. Hanley and the general are more complex characters and might be seen as individuals rather than types. The two men are active characters and the saint passive within the pattern of the story. The story does not really show growth or change of character. The main conflict in the story, Hanley's skinless body and his search for possession, arises from his previous war trauma and his relationship with the foreign general. A minor conflict would be the general's nightmares and wounds caused by the stripping off of Hanley's skin. Those two conflicts are "inherent in the personality of [those two] characters assembled by the author" (Bausch and Cassill xxii). In spite of surrealism of the story, the feelings the characters experience are quite human and therefore "contribute to the reader's assessment of the issues of the conflict … [and] the reader's sympathies for certain characters" (Bausch and Cassill xxii). It could be said the general is conditioned by the warfare, Hanley by his war trauma, but the saint is not conditioned by time and place.

Part of the narration is conveniently told from Hanley's point of view and part of it from the general's. When the narration is subordinated to the general's point of view, and the narrator describes the preliminaries of the stripping off of Hanley's skin, the general's possible homosexuality is omitted. The narration is in the third person, for the story is so surreal that a first-person narration would not suit the context, for the narrator could not be reliable. In spite of the fantastic and derealized story, the reader still gets involved in the narration due to the informal style and diction, which reinforce the emotional impact of the story and makes it very easy to focus on.

One might sum up the theme of the story in a general statement or maxim such as "Do not trust your feelings," and not only feelings, but especially drives, impulses, and desires. A possible appeal to rationalism could be posited regarding Hanley's point of view at least. The saint seems to be happy and satisfied even having lost her skin. Hanley is the one who does not end up happy and satisfied.

5 Conclusion

Short fiction has been in a steadfast development since the primordium of literature. Nothing comes from void. A genre has always operated as the germ for the newcomer, the new genre. In my review of the development of short fiction from the nineteenth century in the second chapter, I attempted to show both continuities and breaks. For the present purpose, the description of a new genre that has emerged only in recent decades, I attempted to show how modernism, mainly through the fiction of Anton Chekhov, brought new trends and techniques to short fiction. His unique style, breaking the rules of the well-made story by dismantling the highly-plotted stories and the traditional form, influenced a variety of modern and postmodern short fiction writers. I would suggest therefore that Chekhov has not only fathered the modern short story but likewise, indirectly, the postmodern or contemporary short-short story. Many writers whom Chekhov influenced would become short-short authors, Raymond Carver and Robert Coover, for example.

Among the innovations that characterize the short-short story are those features that characterize postmodern fiction in general: the focus on reality as a fictional construct, character as mood; a form minimally developed; atmosphere with a mixture of a familiar setting with strange psychic projections. Overall, the short-short story is deliberately unconventional, eccentric, and formally experimental. It is always condensed, making use of colloquial language. The characters are not well-developed within the confines of space but are used as tools to move the plot along. The descriptions of the setting are limited to the strictly necessary. Often, as seen in my examples, the outcome suggests a parable or may be summed up in a maxim or familiar saying, which, however, does not really serve as a “moral” in the traditional sense but may be ironic. The short-short is a hybrid form, bordering on chaos

but in the end achieving a kind of balance. Black humor is a tone and effect often achieved in the short-short, especially in the flash fictions.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the time during which the short-short story arose, scholars and writers searched for a sole name and common traits for the emerging genre. Among the short-shorts analyzed there were modern and postmodern examples. As I attempted in my analyses in Chapter 4, the stories of Malamud and Hemingway are of similar length but qualitatively different from the contemporary examples that followed.

Now, very recently, in 2007, the two major critics and anthologists of the short-short story, Shapard and Thomas decided on labels for two kinds, *new sudden fiction* and *flash fiction*, which in this thesis were regarded as sub-genres and their respective descriptions provided in the examples. That this sub-classification need not be considered a rigid one in its turn, the last story was seen as the hybrid of a hybrid.

Basically, stories of 1/3 of a page to 750 words or two pages are different not only because of their brevity and lack of space to fully develop a plot and characterization, but seem to evoke a single idea or moment, have a reversal, usually comic, in which the initial circumstances of the plot are reversed at the end and as a result are called flash fictions. Meanwhile, stories of one to five pages or 1,000 to 2,000 words, also experimental, which, however, share features more akin to the traditional short story, are called new sudden fictions.

This study has attempted an overall description and taxonomy of the new and emerging genre in prose fiction by summarizing and citing critical positions, organizing ideas, and suggesting connections. Further research on the short-short story might focus on how generic boundaries tend to blur as new examples of each form emerge. It has been frequently hypothesized, for example, that every genre has a trajectory in which a form develops as a deviation from an earlier one, reaches its peak of quality, and then is so repeated that it

becomes overused and begets its successor. One might expect that the short-short will develop further “wrinkles,” new subjects, new modes of narration from the most current tendency, the flash fiction.

6 Works Cited

Bausch, R., and Cassill, R. V. "Writing about Fiction." The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction. Ed. Richard Bausch and R. V. Cassill. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006. xvi-xxiii.

Callaghan, Barry. "The Black Queen." Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories. Ed. Robert Shapard and James Thomas. Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 1986. 198-200.

Carver, Raymond. "Popular Mechanics." Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories. Ed. Robert Shapard and James Thomas. Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 1986. 68-69.

Chekhov, Anton. "The Short Story." The New Short Story Theories. Ed. Charles May. Athens: Ohio UP, 1994. 195-198.

Coover, Robert. "A Sudden Story." Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories. Ed. Robert Shapard and James Thomas. Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 1986. vii.

Éjxenbaum, B.M. "O. Henry and the Theory of the Short Story." Trans. I. R. Titunik. The New Short Story Theories. Ed. Charles May. Athens: Ohio UP, 1994. 81-88.

Francis, H. E. "Sitting." Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories. Ed. Robert Shapard and James Thomas. Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 1986. 101-102.

Galef, David. "My Date with Neanderthal Woman." Flash Fiction Forward: 80 Very Short Stories. Ed. Robert Shapard and James Thomas. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006. 109-111.

Gersão, Teolinda. "The Red Fox Fur Coat." Trans. Margaret Jull Costa. New Sudden Fiction: Short-Short Stories from America and Beyond. Ed. Robert Shapard and James Thomas. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007. 34-39.

Good, Graham. "Notes on the Novella." The New Short Story Theories. Ed. Charles May. Athens: Ohio UP, 1994. 147-164.

Harris, Wendell V. "Vision and Form: The English Novel and the Emergence of the Short Story." The New Short Story Theories. Ed. Charles May. Athens: Ohio UP, 1994. 182-191.

Hemingway, Ernest. "A Very Short Story." Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories. Ed. Robert Shapard and James Thomas. Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 1986. 126-127.

L'Heureux, John. "The Anatomy of Desire." Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories. Ed. Robert Shapard and James Thomas. Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 1986. 117-121.

Malamud, Bernard. "A Lost Grave." Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories. Ed. Robert Shapard and James Thomas. Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 1986. 219-223.

Marler, Robert F. "From Tale to Short Story: The Emergence of a New Genre in the 1850's." The New Short Story Theories. Ed. Charles May. Athens: Ohio UP, 1994. 165-181.

Matthews, Brander. "The Philosophy of the Short-Story." The New Short Story Theories. Ed. Charles May. Athens: Ohio UP, 1994. 73-80.

May, Charles E. "The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction." The New Short Story Theories. Ed. Charles May. Athens: Ohio UP, 1994. 131-143.

---. "Chekhov and the Modern Short Story." The New Short Story Theories. Ed. Charles May. Athens: Ohio UP, 1994. 199-217.

---. The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.

Mose, Gitte. “Danish Short Shorts in the 1990s and the Jena-Romantic Fragments.” The Art of Brevity: Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis. Ed. Per Winther, Jakob Lothe, and Hans H. Skei. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2004. 81-95.

Nemesio, Aldo. "The Comparative Method and the Study of Literature." West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 1999. CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 1.1. Available at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss1/1 Accessed on 25 November 2008.

Nissen, Axel. “The Queer Short Story.” The Art of Brevity: Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis. Ed. Per Winther, Jakob Lothe, and Hans H. Skei. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2004. 181-190.

Paola, Frederick A. “The Wine Doctor.” New Sudden Fiction: Short-Short Stories from America and Beyond. Ed. Robert Shapard and James Thomas. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007. 137-141.

Pasco, Allan H. “On Defining Short Stories.” The New Short Story Theories. Ed. Charles May. Athens: Ohio UP, 1994. 114-130.

Penn, W.S. “The Tale as Genre in Short Fiction.” The New Short Story Theories. Ed. Charles May. Athens: Ohio UP, 1994. 44-55.

Poe, Edgar Allan. “Poe on Short Fiction.” The New Short Story Theories. Ed. Charles May. Athens: Ohio UP, 1994. 59-72.

Pratt, Mary Louise. “The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It.” The New Short Story Theories. Ed. Charles May. Athens: Ohio UP, 1994. 91-113.

Sanford, Jason. “Who Wears Short Shorts? Micro Stories and MFA Disgust.” storySouth: a journal of literature from the New South. Minneapolis, 2004. Available at: <http:www.storysouth.com/fall2004/shortshorts.html> Accessed on 20 September 2007.

Shapard, R., and Thomas, J. Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories. Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 1986.

---. New Sudden Fiction: Short-Short Stories from America and Beyond. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.

---. Flash Fiction Forward: 80 Very Short Stories. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006.

Shea, Don. "Jumper Down." Flash Fiction Forward: 80 Very Short Stories. Ed. Robert Shapard and James Thomas. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006. 17-19.

Stierle, Karl-Heinz. "Story as Exemplum – Exemplum as Story: On the Pragmatics and Poetics of Narrative Texts." The New Short Story Theories. Ed. Charles May. Athens: Ohio UP, 1994. 15-43.

Watt, Ian. The Rise of the Novel. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1984.

7 Appendix

7.1. "A Very Short Story" by Ernest Hemingway

One hot evening in Padua they carried him up onto the roof and he could look out over the top of the town. There were chimney swifts in the sky. After a while it got dark and the searchlights came out. The others went down and took the bottles with them. He and Luz could hear them below on the balcony. Luz sat on the bed. She was cool and fresh in the hot night.

Luz stayed on night duty for three months. They were glad to let her. When they operated on him she prepared him for the operating table; and they had a joke about friend or enema. He went under the anesthetic holding tight on to himself so he would not blab about anything during the silly, talky time. After he got on crutches he used to take the temperatures so Luz would not have to get up from the bed. There were only a few patients, and they all knew about it. They all liked Luz. As he walked back along the halls he thought of Luz in his bed.

Before he went back to the front they went into the Duomo and prayed. It was dim and quiet, and there were other people praying. They wanted to get married, but there was not enough time for the banns, and neither of them had birth certificates. They felt as though they were married, but they wanted everyone to know about it, and to make it so they could not lose it.

Luz wrote him many letters that he never got until after the armistice. Fifteen came in a bunch to the front and he sorted them by the dates and read them all straight through. They were all about the hospital, and how much she loved him, and how it was impossible to get along without him, and how terrible it was missing him at night.

After the armistice they agreed he should go home to get a job so they might be married. Luz would not come home until he had a good job and could come to New York to meet her. It was understood he would not drink, and he did not want to see his friends or anyone in the States. Only to get a job and be married. On the train from Padua to Milan they quarreled about her not being willing to come home at once. When they had to say goodbye, in the station at Milan, they kissed goodbye, but were not finished with the quarrel. He felt sick about saying goodbye like that.

He went to America on a boat from Genoa. Luz went back to Pordenone to open a hospital. It was lonely and rainy there, and there was a battalion of arditi quartered in the town. Living in the muddy, rainy town in the winter, the major of the battalion made love to Luz, and she had never known Italians before, and finally wrote to the States that theirs had been only a boy and girl affair. She was sorry, and she knew he would probably not be able to understand, but might someday forgive her, and be grateful to her, and she expected, absolutely unexpectedly, to be married in the spring. She loved him as always, but she realized now it was only a boy and girl love. She hoped he would have a great career and believed in him absolutely. She knew it was for the best.

The major did not marry her in the spring, or any other time. Luz never got an answer to the letter to Chicago about it. A short time after he contracted gonorrhea from a salesgirl in a loop department store while riding in a taxicab through Lincoln Park.

7.2. "A Lost Grave" by Bernard Malamud

Hecht was a born late bloomer.

One night he woke hearing rain on his window and thought of his young wife in her wet grave. This was something new, because he hadn't thought of her in too many years to be

comfortable about. He saw her in her uncovered grave, rivulets of water streaming in every direction, and Celia, whom he had married when they were of unequal ages, lying alone in the deepening wet. Not so much as a flower grew on her grave, though he could have sworn he had arranged perpetual care.

He stepped into his thoughts perhaps to cover her with a plastic sheet, and though he searched in the cemetery under dripping trees and among many wet plots, he was unable to locate her. The dream he was into offered no tombstone name, row, or plot number, and though he searched for hours, he had nothing to show for it but his wet self. The grave had taken off. How can you cover a woman who isn't where she is supposed to be? That's Celia.

The next morning, Hecht eventually got himself out of bed and into a subway train to Jamaica to see where she was buried. He hadn't been to the cemetery in many years, no particular surprise to anybody considering past circumstances. Life with Celia wasn't exactly predictable. Yet things change in a lifetime, or seem to. Hecht had lately been remembering his life more vividly, for whatever reason. After you hit sixty-five, some things that have two distinguishable sides seem to pick up another that complicates the picture as you look or count. Hecht counted.

Now, though Hecht had been more or less in business all his life, he kept few personal papers, and though he had riffled through a small pile of them that morning, he had found nothing to help him establish Celia's present whereabouts; and after a random looking at gravestones for an hour he felt the need to call it off and spent another hour with a young secretary in the main office, who fruitlessly tapped his name and Celia's into a computer and came up with a scramble of internet dates, grave plots and counter plots, that exasperated him.

"Look, my dear," Hecht said to the flustered young secretary, "if that's how far you can go on this machine, we have to find another way to go further, or I will run out of

patience. This grave is lost territory as far as I am concerned, and we have to do something practical to find it."

"What do you think I'm doing, if I might ask?"

"Whatever you are doing doesn't seem to be much help. This computer is supposed to have a good mechanical memory, but it's either out of order or rusty in its parts. I admit I didn't bring any papers with me but so far the only thing your computer has informed us is that it has nothing much to inform us."

"It has informed us it is having trouble locating the information you want."

"Which adds up to zero minus zero," Hecht said. "I wish to remind you that a lost grave isn't a missing wedding ring we are talking about. It is a lost cemetery plot of the lady who was once my wife that I wish to recover."

The pretty young woman he was dealing with had a tight-lipped conversation with an unknown person, then the buzzer on her desk sounded, and Hecht was given permission to go into the director's office.

"Mr. Goodman will now see you."

He resisted "Good for Mr. Goodman." Hecht nodded only and followed the young woman to an inner office. She knocked once and disappeared, as a friendly voice talked through the door.

"Come in, come in."

"Why should I worry if it's not my fault?" Hecht told himself.

Mr. Goodman pointed to a chair in front of his desk and Hecht was soon seated, watching him pour orange juice from a quart container into a small green glass.

"Will you join me in a sweet mouthful?" he asked, nodding at the container. "I usually take refreshment this time of the morning. It keeps me balanced."

"Thanks," said Hecht, meaning he had more serious problems. "Why I am here is that I am looking for my wife's grave, so far with no success." He cleared his throat, surprised at the emotion that had gathered there.

Mr. Goodman observed Hecht with interest.

"Your outside secretary couldn't find it," Hecht went on, regretting he hadn't found the necessary documents that would identify the grave site. "Your young lady tried her computer in every combination but couldn't produce anything. What was lost is still lost, in other words, a woman's grave."

"*Lost* is premature," Goodman offered. "*Displaced* might be better. In my twenty-eight years in my present capacity, I don't believe we have lost a single grave."

The director tapped lightly on the keys of his desk computer, studied the screen with a squint, and shrugged. "I am afraid that we now draw a blank. The letter *H* volume of our ledgers that we used before we were computerized seems to be missing. I assure you this can't be more than a temporary condition."

"That's what your young lady already informed me."

"She's not my young lady, she's my secretarial assistant."

"I stand corrected," Hecht said. "This meant no offense."

"Likewise," said Goodman. "But we will go on looking. Could you kindly tell me, if you don't mind, what was the status of your relationship to your wife at the time of her death?" He peered over half-moon glasses to check the computer reading.

"There was no status. We were separated. What has that got to do with her burial plot?"

"The reason I inquire is, I thought it might refresh your memory. For example, is this the correct cemetery, the one you are looking in – Mount Jereboam? Some people confuse us with Mount Hebron."

"I guarantee you it was Mount Jereboam."

Hecht, after a hesitant moment, gave these facts: "My wife wasn't the most stable woman. She left me twice and disappeared for months. Although I took her back twice, we weren't together at the time of her death. Once she threatened to take her life, though eventually she didn't. In the end she died of a normal sickness, not cancer. This was years later, when we weren't living together anymore, but I carried out her burial, to the best of my knowledge, in this exact cemetery. I also heard she had lived for a short time with some guy she met somewhere, but when she died, I was the one who buried her. Now I am sixty-five, and lately I have had this urge to visit the grave of someone who lived with me when I was a young man. This is a grave that everybody now tells me they can't locate."

Goodman rose at his desk, a short man, five feet tall. "I will institute a careful research."

"The quicker, the better," Hecht replied. "I am still curious what happened to her grave."

Goodman almost guffawed, but caught himself and thrust out his hand. "I will keep you well informed, don't worry."

Hecht left irritated. On the train back to the city he thought of Celia and her various unhappinesses. He wished he had told Goodman she had spoiled his life.

That night it rained. To his surprise he found a wet spot on his pillow.

The next day Hecht again went to the graveyard. "What did I forget that I ought to remember?" he asked himself. Obviously the grave plot, row, and number. Though he sought it diligently he could not find it. Who can remember something he has once and for all put out of his mind? It's like trying to grow beans out of a bag of birdseed.

"But I must be patient and I will find out. As time goes by I am bound to recall. When my memory says yes, I won't argue no."

But weeks passed and Hecht still could not remember what he was trying to. “Maybe I have reached a dead end?”

Another month went by and at last the cemetery called him. It was Mr. Goodman clearing his throat. Hecht pictured him at his desk sipping orange juice.

“Mr. Hecht?”

“The same.”

“This is Mr. Goodman. A happy Rosh-ha-shonah.”

“A happy Rosh-ha-shonah to you.”

“Mr. Hecht, I wish to report progress. Are you prepared for an insight?”

“You name it,” Hecht said.

“So let me use a better word. We have tracked your wife, and it turns out she isn’t in the grave there where the computer couldn’t find her. To be frank, we found her in a grave with another gentleman.”

“What kind of gentleman? Who in God’s name is he? I am her legal husband.”

“This one, if you will pardon me, is the man who lived with your wife after she left you. They lived together on and off, so don’t blame yourself too much. After she died he got a court order, and they removed her to a different grave, where we also laid him after his death. The judge gave him the court order because he convinced him that he had loved her for many years.”

Hecht was embarrassed. “What are you talking about? How could he transfer her grave anywhere if it wasn’t his legal property? Her grave belonged to me. I paid cash for it.”

“That grave is still there,” Goodman explained, “but the names were mixed up. His name was Kaplan but the workmen buried her under Caplan. Your grave is still in the cemetery, though we had it under Kaplan and not Hecht. I apologize to you for this inconvenience but I think we now have got the mystery cleared up.”

"So thanks," said Hecht. He felt he had lost a wife but was no longer a widower.

"Also," Goodman reminded him, "don't forget you gained an empty grave for future use. Nobody is there and you own the plot."

Hecht said that was obviously true.

The story had astounded him. Yet whenever he felt like telling it to someone he knew, or had just met, he wasn't sure he wanted to.

7.3. "The Red Fox Fur Coat" by Teolinda Gersão

On her way home one day, a humble bank clerk happened to see a red fox fur coat in a furrier's shop window. She stopped outside and felt a shiver of pleasure and desire run through her. For this was the coat she had always wanted. There wasn't another one like it, she thought, running her eyes over the other coats hanging from the metal rack or delicately draped over a brocade sofa. It was rare, unique; she had never seen such a color, golden, with a coppery sheen, and so bright it looked as if it were on fire. The shop was closed at the time, as she discovered when, giving in to the impulse to enter, she pushed at the door. She would come back tomorrow, as early as possible, on her lunch break, or during the morning; yes, she would find a pretext to slip out during the morning. That night she slept little and awoke feeling troubled and slightly feverish. She counted the minutes until the shop would open; her eyes wandered from the clock on the wall to her wristwatch and back, while she dealt with various customers. As soon as she could, she found an excuse to pop out and run to the shop, trembling to think that the coat might have been sold. It had not, she learned, been sold; she felt her breath return, her heartbeat ease, felt the blood drain from her face and resume its measured flow.

"It could have been made for you," said the saleswoman when the bank clerk put the coat on and looked at herself in the mirror. "It fits perfectly on the shoulders and at the waist, and the length is just right," she said, "and it really suits your skin tone. Not that I'm trying to pressure you into buying it," she added hurriedly, "obviously you're free to choose anything you like, but if you don't mind my saying so, the coat really does look as if it had been made for you. Just for you," she said again, with the hint of a smile.

"How much is it?" the bank clerk asked, half turning round – thus setting the hem of the coat swinging – because she found it hard to take her eyes off her own image in the mirror.

She recoiled, stunned, when she heard the reply. It cost far more than she had thought, five times more than she could possibly afford.

"But we can spread out the payment if you like," said the saleswoman kindly.

She could always sacrifice her holidays, the bank clerk thought. Or divert some of the money intended for a car loan. She could use less heating, eat smaller meals. It would do her good, really, because she was beginning to put on a bit of weight.

"All right," she said, doing rapid calculations in her head. "I'll give you a deposit and start paying next week. But it's definitely mine now, isn't it?"

"Absolutely," said the saleswoman, attaching a "Sold" label to the coat. "You can take it away with you when you've paid the third installment."

She started visiting the shop at night, when it was closed and no one would see her, in order to gaze at the coat through the window, and each time it brought her more joy, each time it was brighter, more fiery, like red flames that did not burn, but were soft on her body, like a thick, ample, enfolding skin that moved when she moved…

It would be admired, as would she, people would turn to stare after her, but it was not this that provoked a secret smile; rather, she realized, it was an inner satisfaction, an obscure

certainty, a sense of being in harmony with herself, that spilled over in all kinds of small ways. It was as if the rhythm of her breathing had changed, had grown calmer and deeper. She realized too, perhaps because she no longer felt tired, that she moved more quickly, that she could walk effortlessly now, at twice her usual speed. Her legs were agile, her feet nimble. Everything about her was lighter, quicker; her back, shoulders, and limbs all moved more easily.

It must be all the keep-fit I've been doing, she thought, because for some reason she had started taking regular exercise. For a few months now she had been spending two hours a week running at the track. But what she liked most was to go running in the forest, on the outskirts of the city, feeling the sand crunch beneath her feet, learning to place her feet on the ground in a different way – in direct, perfect, intimate contact with the earth. She was intensely aware of her body; she was more alive now, more alert. All her senses were keener too, she could hear, even from some distance away, infinitesimal sounds which, before, would have gone unnoticed: a lizard scurrying through the leaves, an invisible mouse making a twig crack, an acorn falling, a bird landing on a bush; she could sense atmospheric changes long before they happened: the wind turning, a rise in humidity, an increase in air pressure that would culminate in rain. And another aspect of all the things to which she had now become sensitized was the discovery of smells, a whole world of smells; she could find paths and trails purely by smell; it was strange how she had never before noticed that everything has a smell: the earth, the bark of trees, plants, leaves, and that every animal can be distinguished by its own peculiar smell, a whole spectrum of smells that came to her on waves through the air, and which she could draw together or separate out, sniffing the wind, imperceptibly lifting her head. She suddenly became very interested in animals and found herself leafing through encyclopedias, looking at the pictures – the hedgehog's pale, soft, tender underbelly; the swift hare, of uncertain hue, leaping; she pored over the bodies of birds, fascinated, pondering the

softness of the flesh behind their feathers; and a single word kept bobbing insistently about in her mind: predator.

She seemed to be hungrier too, she thought, as she put away her books and went into the kitchen, and this negative aspect to all the physical exercise displeased her greatly. She tried to find a way to avoid putting on weight and prowled, dissatisfied, past patisseries, never finding what she was looking for, because the smell of coffee was repellent to her and made her feel nauseous. No, she was hungry for other things, although she didn't quite know what, fruit perhaps; this might be an opportunity to lose a little weight. She bought a vast quantity of grapes and apples and ate them all in one day, but still she felt hungry, a hidden hunger that gnawed at her from inside and never stopped.

She was cheered by an unexpected invitation to a party, welcoming any diversion that would make her forget that absurd hunger. She reveled in getting dressed up and in painting her lips and nails scarlet. Her nails, she noticed, were very long, and even her hands seemed more sensitive, more elongated. Anyone she touched at the party that night would remain eternally in her power, she thought, smiling at herself in the mirror – a feline smile, it seemed to her. She narrowed her eyes and widened the smile, letting it spread over her face, which took on a pleasingly triangular shape that she further emphasized with make-up.

In the middle of the party, she noticed someone slicing up some meat, cooked very rare – roast beef, she thought, although these words had suddenly ceased to have any meaning. She reached out her hand and devoured a whole slice. Ah, she thought, the taste of almost raw meat, the action of sinking her teeth into it, of making the blood spurt, the taste of blood on her tongue, in her mouth, the innocence of devouring the whole slice, and she took another slice, already sensing that using her hand was now a pointless waste of time, that she should just pick it up directly with her mouth.

She burst out laughing and began to dance, waving her bloodstained hands in the air, feeling her own blood rise, as if some tempestuous inner force had been unleashed, a malign force that she could transmit to others, a plague or a curse, but this idea was nevertheless sweet, quiet, almost joyful, she felt, as she swayed, slightly drunk, listening to the echo of her own laughter.

She would spend the night obeying all these newly released forces and, in the morning, she would go and fetch the coat, because the day had come when it would be hers; it was part of her; she would know it even with her eyes closed, by touch alone, the soft, thick pelt burning her skin, cleaving to her, until she could no longer tell skin from skin…

"It could have been made for you," the saleswoman said again, as she removed it from the coat hanger.

The coat cleaving to her, until she could no longer tell skin from skin, as she could see in the mirror, as she turned the collar up around her head, her face disfigured, suddenly thinner, made up to look longer, her eyes narrow, restless, burning… "Goodbye, then, and thanks," she said, rushing out of the shop, afraid that time was getting short and that people would stop in alarm to stare at her, because suddenly the impulse to go down on all fours and simply run was too strong, reincarnating her body, rediscovering her animal body; and as she fled, as she left the city behind her and simply fled, it took an almost superhuman effort to get into her car and drive to the edge of the forest, keeping tight control of her body, keeping tight control of her tremulous body for just one more minute, before that slam of the door, that first genuine leap on feet free at last, shaking her back and her tail, sniffing the air, the ground, the wind, and, with a howl of pleasure and joy, plunging off into the depths of the forest.

7.4. "The Wine Doctor" by Frederick Adolf Paola

It was a late afternoon in August in the year of our Lord 1930, in year VIII of the *Era Fascista*. Dottore Cotrolaò, just back in his second-floor office after a meal of *morzeddu* washed down with an exceptional local wine from the Savuto Valley, did a double take when he saw who had entered his office as his first patient of the evening.

It was Ezio Delli Castelli, the wine doctor of Nocera Terinese. A chemist who had made his living chiefly as an oenologist, a specialist in wine making, he was also a part-time oenopath, a practitioner of the unique healing art of oenopathy. Patients came to him with ailments of various sorts, and he prescribed a course of treatment with this particular wine or that. The wines he recommended depended, of course, upon the patient's diagnosis – and circumstances. While he closely guarded his therapeutic secrets, it was thought that his prescriptions took into account the types of grapes that went into the wine; the composition of the soil from which the grapes had been harvested; how long they had been allowed to ferment before racking; and even the condition of the barrels in which the wine was stored.

Ezio Delli Castelli was well-versed in Italian wines in general, and had a working knowledge of imported wines as well. Most of his patients, however, were limited for financial reasons to wines produced locally, by the likes of Carmine Mauri, Vittorio Ventura, Leopoldo Rossi, Nicola Mancini, Carmine Nicoli, and Annunziato Palarchio, using Calabrian grape varieties such as *Aglianico*, *Gaglioppo*, *Guarnaccia*, *Pecorello*, *Nerello*, *Sangiovese*, *Magliocco*, *Nocera*, *Trebbiano Toscano*, *Zibibbo*, *Greco*, *Malvasia*, and *Mantonico*. Ezio Delli Castelli did not charge for his oenopathic services, and most patients were quite satisfied with the treatment they received from him, as well as with the results they experienced.

Dottore Cotrolaò knew that many of the townspeople had sought the advice of Ezio Delli Castelli for health problems, either instead of or in addition to more conventional

medicine. He supposed it might have something to do with the fact that in those days there were eighteen *bettole* or cantinas in Nocera Terinese and only one pharmacy. The patients, not wanting to offend Dottore Cotrolaò, didn't mention it to him; nor would Dottore Cotrolaò deign to broach the subject, other than in the form of an occasional sarcastic remark to a patient he had not seen in a while, such as, "Eh, Don Francesco, long time no see. Had any good wine lately?"

"*Buona sera, Don Delli Castelli*." While Cotrolaò had heard Ezio Delli Castelli's clients refer to him as *dottore*, damned if he was going to address him by that honorific title. "*Che posso fare per Voi*?" he asked. "What can I do for you?" He had used *Voi* (the polite form of "you" favored by Mussolini) rather than *Lei* (the equally polite form of "you" discouraged by Mussolini as Iberian) because Cotrolaò knew Ezio Delli Castelli disdained the use of *Voi*, though he wasn't sure whether this aversion was grounded in politics or linguistics.

Ezio Delli Castelli, a slight man dressed in a worn but freshly pressed brown three-piece suit, looked perplexed and somewhat embarrassed. Fumbling with the hat on his lap, he looked at the taller, heavier man seated behind the dark wood desk before him.

"*Dottore, i raggi*," he said. "The x-rays."

"Of course," Dottore Cotrolaò answered, slapping himself on the forehead. Now he remembered. How had he forgotten? Ezio Delli Castelli had visited him about a month before with a nagging cough and had reported coughing up small amounts of blood. Dottore Cotrolaò had sent him to the hospital in Catanzaro for a chest x-ray. Searching for the film in the pile on his desk, Dottore Cotrolaò studied Ezio Delli Castelli surreptitiously. Today he was noticeably thinner and appeared mildly dyspneic.

Locating the envelope in a pile of mail that had been delivered only the day before, Dottore Cotrolaò opened it and held the film up to the light. It showed an extensive mediastinal mass involving the bifurcation of the trachea. Erosions were evident in the ribs.

There was silence in the room, and the two men were unaware of the sounds of life from the world in the street below. The only connection between the two worlds was the aroma of *espresso* wafting up from the bars down the street.

When Dottore Cotrolaò spoke, it was not without some irritation in his voice. "*Don Ezio*, tell me something. You practice your healing craft, your…"

"Oenopathy."

"… oenopathy. Then you get sick and you come to me. Why?" Even as he asked his question, compelled as he was by frustration and curiosity, Dottore Cotrolaò regretted both the tone of his voice and his inability to control his own tongue.

Ezio Delli Castelli smiled. "*Dottore*, I don't know any other oenopaths, and it would be improper and certainly foolish of me to treat myself."

Ezio Delli Castelli continued, "That's not to say you were my second choice. Not at all." He shook his head. "I am most grateful for the care you have rendered me, and," he went on, good-naturedly, "if you can heal me I will gladly admit that your healing art is stronger than mine."

Dottore Cotrolaò sadly shook his head no.

In the conversation that followed, he told Ezio Delli Castelli, as best he could, what the near future would likely hold for him, and prescribed morphine for management of his symptoms. It was, alas, a short conversation during which Dottore Cotrolaò, who had delivered his share of bad news to patients in this very room, avoided looking directly at Ezio Delli Castelli. Instead, he monitored his patient's reflection in a mirror on a side wall. At a

certain point, Ezio Delli Castelli followed his doctor's gaze to that same mirror, and for a moment they studied each other's reflection.

When Dottore Cotrolaò finished speaking, Ezio Delli Castelli nodded and put on his hat as he got up to leave. Cotrolaò quickly came out from behind his desk and placed a gentle hand on Delli Castelli's shoulder to stop him. "Just a moment, please," he said.

Cotrolaò held his hands out before him, palms up, and slowly turned them over, showing them to Ezio Delli Castelli, who, holding them in his own, studied them for a moment.

"Arthritis deformans," Ezio Delli Castelli remarked empathetically. Impressed, Cotrolaò raised his eyebrows and nodded.

The two men looked directly at each other.

"There is a small producer near Verbicaro," said Ezio Delli Castelli, taking a fountain pen from his pocket and writing the name of the producer on a piece of paper that had been handed to him by Cotrolaò. "*Il bianco, non il rosso*," he emphasized. "The white, not the red. No more than 300 milliliters a day. I would try it."

"I will," Cotrolaò answered.

They shook hands.

"*Grazie, dottore*," said Ezio Delli Castelli.

"*Gracie a Lei, dottore*," answered Cotrolaò.

7.5. "The Black Queen" by Barry Callaghan

Hughes and McCrae were fastidious men who took pride in their old colonial house, the clean simple lines and stucco walls and the painted pale blue picket fence. They were surrounded by houses converted into small warehouses, trucking yards where houses had

been torn down, and along the street, a school filled with foreign children, but they didn't mind. It gave them an embattled sense of holding on to something important, a tattered remnant of good taste in an area of waste overrun by rootless olive-skinned children.

McCrae wore his hair a little too long now that he was going gray, and while Hughes with his clipped moustache seemed to be a serious man intent only on his work, which was costume design, McCrae wore Cuban heels and lacquered his nails. When they'd met ten years ago Hughes had said, "You keep walking around like that and you'll need a body to keep you from getting poked in the eye." McCrae did all the cooking and drove the car.

But they were not getting along these days. Hughes blamed his bursitis, but they were both silently unsettled by how old they had suddenly become, how loose in the thighs, and their feet, when they were showering in the morning, seemed bonier, the toes longer, the nails yellow and hard, and what they wanted was tenderness, to be able to yield almost tearfully, full of a pity for themselves that would not be belittled or laughed at, and when they stood alone in their separate bedrooms they wanted that tenderness from each other, but when they were having their bedtime tea in the kitchen, as they had done for years using lovely green and white Limoges cups, if one touched the other's hand then suddenly they both withdrew into an unspoken, smiling aloofness, as if some line of privacy had been crossed. Neither could bear their thinning wrists and the little pouches of darkening flesh under the chin. They spoke of being with younger people and even joked slyly about bringing a young man home, but that seemed such a betrayal of everything that they had believed had set them apart from others, everything they believed had kept them together, that they sulked and nettled away at each other, and though nothing had apparently changed in their lives, they were always on edge, Hughes more than McCrae.

One of their pleasures was collecting stamps, rare and mint-perfect, with no creases or smudges on the gum. Their collection, carefully mounted in a leatherbound blue book with

seven little plastic windows per page, was worth several thousand dollars. They had passed many pleasant evenings together on the Directoire settee arranging the old ochre and carmine colored stamps. They agreed there was something almost sensual about holding a perfectly preserved piece of the past, unsullied, as if everything didn't have to change, didn't have to end up swamped by decline and decay. They disapproved of the new stamps and dismissed them as crude and wouldn't have them in their book. The pages for the recent years remained empty and they liked that; the emptiness was their statement about themselves and their values, and Hughes, holding a stamp up into the light between his tweezers, would say, "None of that rough trade for us."

One afternoon they went down to the philatelic shops around Adelaide and Richmond Streets and saw a stamp they had been after for a long time, a large and elegant black stamp of Queen Victoria in her widow's weeds. It was rare and expensive, a dead-letter stamp from the turn of the century. They stood side-by-side over the glass countercase admiring it, their hands spread on the glass, but when McCrae, the overhead fluorescent light catching his lacquered nails, said, "Well, I certainly would like that little black sweetheart," the owner, who had sold stamps to them for several years, looked up and smirked, and Hughes suddenly snorted, "You old queen, I mean why don't you just quit wearing those goddamn Cuban heels, eh? I mean why not?" He walked out leaving McCrae embarrassed and hurt and when the owner said, "So what was wrong?" McCrae cried, "Screw you," and strutted out.

Through the rest of the week they were deferential around the house, offering each other every consideration, trying to avoid any squabble before Mother's Day at the end of the week when they were going to hold their annual supper for friends, three other male couples. Over the years it had always been an elegant, slightly mocking evening that often ended bitter-sweetly and left them feeling close, comforting each other.

McCrae, wearing a white, linen shirt, starch in the cuffs and mother-of-pearl cuff links, worked all Sunday afternoon in the kitchen, and through the window he could see the crab apple tree in bloom and he thought how in previous years he would have begun planning to put down some jelly in the old pressed glass jars they kept in the cellar, but instead, head down, he went on stuffing and tying the pork loin roast. Then in the early evening he heard Hughes at the door, and there was laughter from the front room and someone cried out, "What do you do with an elephant who has three balls on him… you don't know silly, well you walk him and pitch to the giraffe," and there were howls of laughter and the clinking of glasses. It had been the same every year, eight men sitting down to a fine supper with expensive wines, the table set with their best silver under the antique carved wooden candelabra.

Having prepared all the raw vegetables, the cauliflower and carrots, the avocados and finger-sized miniature corn-on-the-cob, and placed porcelain bowls of homemade dip in the center of a pewter tray, McCrae stared at his reflection for a moment in the window over the kitchen sink and then he took a plastic slipcase out of the knives-and-forks drawer. The case contained the dead-letter stamp. He licked it all over and pasted it on his forehead and then slipped on the jacket of his charcoal brown crushed velvet suit, took hold of the tray, and stepped out into the front room.

The other men, sitting in a circle around the coffee table, looked up and one of them giggled. Hughes cried, "Oh my God." McCrae, as if nothing were the matter, said, "My dears, time for the crudités." He was in his silk stocking feet, and as he passed the tray he winked at Hughes who sat staring at the black queen.

7.6. "My Date with Neanderthal Woman" by David Galef

I didn't know whether to bring flowers, which don't say much to someone from a basic subsistence culture. But a raw beefsteak might come across as too suggestive, and I'd read somewhere that Neanderthals were supposed to be vegetarians. I opted for the middle road, a box of chocolates.

I arrived just as the sun was sinking below the tree line. Glena lived in a cave by the edge of the forest and had, I'd heard, a more natural sense of time than those of us dominated by Rolexes and cell phones. Still, she wasn't there when I hurt my hand knocking on the cave entrance.

I tried twice, the second time with my foot. Then I called out, emphasizing the glottal G I'd heard when her name was pronounced by the TransWorld Dating Agency. She appeared as if suddenly planted in front of me, barrel-chested and bandy-legged, not much taller than a high-cut tree stump. Her furry brown hair was matted with sweat, but she smiled in a flat-faced way as I held out the chocolate.

Grabbing the box, she ripped it open and crowed in delight. She stuffed several candies with their wrappers into her mouth and chewed vigorously. The agency had told me not to waste time with complicated verbal behavior, so I just pointed at her and myself and said, "Glena, Robert."

She nodded, then pointed to the chocolate and rubbed her belly. Such a primal response! Frankly, I'd grown tired of modern women and their endless language games. She offered me one of the remaining chocolates from the box, and I was touched: pure reciprocity, though she looked disappointed that I didn't eat the wrappers. I mimed eating and pointed away from the forest. I would take her out to dinner.

Neanderthals, I recalled, were often on the cusp of starvation. She seemed to understand and followed me obediently as I led her to Chez Asperge, a small French-fusion-vegan restaurant not far from the woods.

Chez Asperge is elegant but casual, and we were greeted heartily by Claude the *maitre d'*. I didn't know the place had a dress code. In fact, the little loincloth Glena wore made me feel overdressed. Anyway, the situation was fixed with a borrowed jacket, which Glena wore in a charmingly asymmetric fashion.

God, I hate all the introductory explanations of a first date – which is why I was so happy none of that mattered to Glena. With a familiarity as if she'd known me for years, she spread her arms on the table and scooped up the mashed lentil dip. It's true, a woman who enjoys her food is sexy. Of course, she offered me some, and I showed her how to spread it on pita. But knives seemed to frighten her, and I'm sorry about that scar on the table. Still, we had a lovely meal – she particularly enjoyed the raw vegetable plate.

After dinner, I walked her home along the forest path. Movies and clubs could come later. I didn't want to overstimulate her. Even electric lights made her twitch. But along the path the moon was out, illuminating Glena's short but powerful body in a way that was weirdly beautiful. When I reached for her hand, she jerked back – different cultures have different intimacy rites, the agency guy said – so I took pains to explain that my intentions were honorable. Maybe she couldn't understand the words, yet I think she got the gist. Anyway, there's a limit to what I can achieve by gestures.

Eventually, her hand crept into mine and nearly crushed it. My miming of pain, hopping on one foot and flailing, made her laugh. A sense of humor is important in a relationship.

We paused at the entrance to her cave. She smiled, the gaps in her teeth drawing me in. Her earthly aroma was a definite aphrodisiac. What came next was sort of a kiss, followed

by a rib-cracking embrace that the osteopath says is healing nicely. Still, whenever I think about it, I feel twinges. What a woman! I'd like to invite her out this weekend, but I can't e-mail her. Maybe I'll just drop by her cave accidentally on purpose with a bouquet of broccoli.

Yes, I know all the objections. Some couples are separated by decades, but we're separated by millennia. I like rock music and she likes the music of rocks. I'm modern Homo Sapiens and she's Neanderthal, but I think we can work out our differences if we try.

7.7. "Popular Mechanics" by Raymond Carver

Early that day the weather turned and the snow was melting into dirty water. Streaks of it ran down from the little shoulder-high window that faced the back yard. Cars slushed by on the street outside, where it was getting dark. But it was getting dark on the inside too.

He was in the bedroom pushing clothes into a suitcase when she came to the door.

I'm glad you're leaving! I'm glad you're leaving! she said! Do you hear?

He kept on putting his things into the suitcase.

Son of a bitch! I'm so glad you're leaving! She began to cry. You can't even look at me in the face, can you?

Then she noticed the baby's picture on the bed and picked it up.

He looked at her and she wiped her eyes and stared at him before turning and going back to the living room.

Bring that back, he said.

Just get your things and get out, she said.

He did not answer. He fastened the suitcase, put on his coat, looked around the bedroom before turning off the light. Then he went out to the living room.

She stood in the doorway of the little kitchen, holding the baby.

I want the baby, he said.

Are you crazy?

No, but I want the baby. I'll get someone to come by for his things.

You're not touching this baby, she said.

The baby had begun to cry and she uncovered the blanket from around his head.

Oh, oh, she said, looking at the baby.

He moved toward her.

For God's sake! she said. She took a step back into the kitchen.

I want the baby.

Get out of here!

She turned and tried to hold the baby over in a corner behind the stove.

But he came up. He reached across the stove and tightened his hands on the baby.

Let go of him, he said.

Get away, get away! she cried.

The baby was red-faced and screaming. In the scuffle they knocked down a flowerpot that hung behind the stove.

He crowded her into the wall then, trying to break her grip. He held on to the baby and pushed with all his weight.

Let go of him, he said.

Don't, she said. You're hurting the baby, she said.

I'm not hurting the baby, he said.

The kitchen window gave no light. In the near-dark he worked on her fisted fingers with one hand and with the other hand he gripped the screaming baby up under an arm near the shoulder.

She felt her fingers being forced open. She felt the baby going from her.

No! she screamed just as her hands came loose.

She would have it, this baby. She grabbed for the baby's other arm. She caught the baby around the wrist and leaned back.

But he would not let go. He felt the baby slipping out of his hands and he pulled back very hard.

In this manner, the issue was decided.

7.8. "Jumper Down" by Don Shea

Henry was our jumper up expert – had been for years. When the jumper was up, by which I mean when he or she was still on the building ledge or the bridge, Henry was superb at talking them down. Of all the paramedics I worked with, he had the touch.

When the call came in "jumper up," Henry always went, if he was working that shift. When the call was "jumper down," it didn't matter much which of us went – we were all equally capable of attending to the mess on the ground or fishing some dude out of the water.

The university hospital we worked out of got more than its share of jumpers of both varieties because of its proximity to the major bridges – Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Williamsburg. Over the years, dealing with his jumpers and the other deranged human flotsam the job threw his way, Henry got a tad crusty – you might even say burned out – although he was still pretty effective with the jumper ups. He always considered them a personal challenge.

Henry was retiring. On his last shift, we threw him a little party in the lounge two doors down from the ER, even brought some liquor in for the off-duty guys, although that was against the rules. Everyone was telling their favorite jumper stories for Henry's benefit; he'd heard them all before, but that didn't matter. Big John told the story of the window cleaner

who took a dive four stories off his scaffolding. They got him in the bus, started a couple of IV lines, and John radioed ahead to the ER, "Bringing in the jumper down." Now this guy was in sad shape, two broken legs, femur poking through the skin, but he sits right up and says with great indignation, "I did *not* jump, goddamnit! I *fell*!"

Just as Big John finished this story, a call came in. Jumper up on the Brooklyn Bridge. Everyone agreed it was meant to be, it was Henry's last jumper, and I went along since it was my shift too.

The pillar on the Manhattan side of the Brooklyn Bridge is over water. Our jumper up had climbed the pillar on the Brooklyn side, which is over land. By the time we got there, the police had a couple of spotlights on him, and we could see him clearly, sitting on a beam about a hundred feet up, looking pretty relaxed. Henry took a megaphone and was preparing to climb up after him when the guy jumped.

It looked like a circus act. No exaggeration. Two half gainers and a backflip, and every second of it caught in the spotlights. The guy hit the ground about thirty yards from where we were standing, and Henry and I were over there on the run, although it was obvious he was beyond help.

He was dead, but he hadn't died yet. His eyes were open, and he looked somewhat surprised by what he had done to himself. Henry leaned in close and bellowed in his ear.

"I know you can hear me, 'cause hearing's the last thing to go. I just gotta tell ya, I wanted you to know, that jump was fucking *magnificent*!"

At first I considered Henry's parting shot pretty insensitive. Then I thought about it some. I mean, it was clearly not the occasion to *admonish* the jumper, who had obviously suffered enough defeats and rejections in his life. Why should he spend his last few seconds on this earth hearing how he blew it once again?

Seems to me if I was a jumper on the way out, right out there on the ragged edge of the big mystery, I might, indeed, upon my exit, find some last modicum of comfort in Henry's words, human words of recognition and congratulation.

7.9. "Sitting" by H. E. Francis

In the morning the man and woman were sitting on his front steps. They sat all day. They would not move.

With metronomic regularity he peered at them through the pane in the front door.

They did not leave at dark. He wondered when they ate or slept or did their duties.

At dawn they were still sitting there. They sat through sun and rain.

At first only the immediate neighbors called: Who are they? What are they doing there?

He did not know.

Then neighbors from farther down the street called. People who passed and saw the couple called.

He never heard the man and woman talk.

When he started getting calls from all over the city, from strangers and city fathers, professionals and clerks, garbage and utilities men, and the postman, who had to walk around them to deliver letters, he had to do something.

He asked them to leave.

They said nothing. They sat. They stared, indifferent.

He said he would call the police.

The police gave them a talking to, explained the limits of their rights, and took them away in the police car.

In the morning they were back.

The next time the police said they would put them in jail if the jails were not so full, though they would have to find a place for them somewhere, if he insisted.

That is your problem, he said.

No, it is really yours, the police told him, but they removed the pair.

When he looked out the next morning, the man and woman were sitting on the steps.

They sat there every day for years.

Winters he expected them to die from the cold.

But he died.

He had no relatives, so the house went to the city.

The man and woman went on sitting there.

When the city threatened to remove the man and woman, neighbors and citizens brought a suit against the city: after sitting so long, the man and woman deserved the house.

The petitioners won. The man and woman took over the house.

In the morning strange men and women were sitting on front steps all over the city.

7.10. "The Anatomy of Desire" by John L'Heureux

Because Hanley's skin had been stripped off by the enemy, he could find no one who was willing to be with him for long. The nurses were obligated, of course, to see him now and then, and sometimes the doctor, but certainly not the other patients and certainly not his wife and children. He was raw, he was meat, and he would never be any better. He had a great and natural desire, therefore, to be possessed by someone.

He would walk around on his skinned feet, leaving bloody footprints up and down the corridors, looking for someone to love him.

"You're not supposed to be out here," the nurse said. And she added, somehow making it sound kind, "You untidy the floor, Hanley."

"I want to be loved by someone," he said. "I'm human too. I'm like you."

But he knew he was not like her. Everybody called her the saint.

"Why couldn't it be you?" he said.

She was swabbing his legs with blood retardant, a new discovery that kept Hanley going. It was one of those miracle medications that just grew out of the war.

"I wasn't chosen," she said. "I have my skin."

"No," he said. "I mean why couldn't it be you who will love me, possess me? I have desires too," he said.

She considered this as she swabbed his shins and the soles of his feet.

"I have no desires," she said. "Or only one. It's the same thing."

He looked at her loving face. It was not a pretty face, but it was saintly.

"Then you will?" he said.

"If I come to know sometime that I must," she said.

. . .

The enemy had not chosen Hanley, they had just lucked upon him sleeping in his trench. They were a raid party of four, terrified and obedient, and they had been told to bring back an enemy to serve as an example of what is done to infiltrators.

They dragged Hanley back across the line and ran him, with his hands tied behind his back, the two kilometers to the general's tent.

The general dismissed the guards because he was very taken with Hanley. He untied the cords that bound his wrists and let his arms hang free. Then slowly, ritually, he tipped Hanley's face toward the light and examined it carefully. He kissed him on the brow and on the cheek and finally on the mouth. He gazed deep and long into Hanley's eyes until he saw

his own reflection there looking back. He traced the lines of Hanley's eyebrows, gently, with the tip of his index finger. "Such a beautiful face," he said in his own language. He pressed his palms lightly against Hanley's forehead, against his cheekbones, his jaw. With his little finger he memorized the shape of Hanley's lips, the laugh lines at his eyes, the chin. The general did Hanley's face very thoroughly. Afterward he did some things down below, and so just before sunrise when the time came to lead Hanley out to the stripping post, he told the soldiers with the knives: "This young man could be my own son; so spare him here and here."

The stripping post stood dead-center in the line of barbed wire only a few meters beyond the range of gunfire. A loudspeaker was set up and began to blare the day's message. "This is what happens to infiltrators. No infiltrators will be spared." And then as troops from both sides watched through binoculars, the enemy cut the skin from Hanley's body, sparing – as the general had insisted – his face and his genitals. They were skilled men and the skin was stripped off expeditiously and they hung it, headless, on the barbed wire as an example. They lay Hanley himself on the ground where he could die.

He was rescued a little after noon when the enemy, for no good reason, went into sudden retreat.

Hanley was given emergency treatment at the field unit, and when they had done what they could for him, they sent him on to the vets' hospital. At least there, they told each other, he will be attended by the saint.

It was quite some time before the saint said yes, she would love him.

"Not just love me. Possess me."

"There are natural reluctancies," she said. "There are personal peculiarities," she said. "You will have to have patience with me."

"You're supposed to be a saint," he said.

So she lay down with him in his bloody bed and he found great satisfaction in holding this small woman in his arms. He kissed her and caressed her and felt young and whole again. He did not miss his wife and children. He did not miss his skin.

The saint did everything she must. She told him how handsome he was and what pleasure he gave her. She touched him in the way he liked best. She said he was her whole life, her fate. And at night when he woke her to staunch the blood, she whispered how she needed him, how she could not live without him.

This went on for some time.

The war was over and the occupying forces had made the general mayor of the capital city. He was about to run for senator and wanted his past to be beyond the reproach of any investigative committee. He wrote Hanley a letter which he sent through the International Red Cross.

"You could have been my own son," he said. "What we do in war is what we have to do. We do not choose cruelty or violence. I did only what was my duty."

"I am in love and I am loved," Hanley said. "Why isn't this enough?"

The saint was swabbing his chest and belly with blood retardant.

"Nothing is ever enough," she said.

"I love, but I am not possessed by love," he said, "I want to be surrounded by you. I want to be enclosed. I want to be enveloped. I don't have the words for it. But do you understand?"

"You want to be possessed," she said.

"I want to be inside you."

And so they made love, but afterward he said, “That was not enough. That is only a metaphor for what I want.”

The general was elected senator and was made a trustee of three nuclear-arms conglomerates. But he was not well. And he was not sleeping well.

He wrote to Hanley, “I wake in the night and see your face before mine. I feel your forehead pressing against my palms. I taste your breath. I did only what I had to do. You could have been my son.”

“I know what I want,” Hanley said.

“If I can do it, I will,” the saint said.

“I want your skin.”

And so she lay down on the long white table, shuddering, while Hanley made his first incision. He cut along the shoulders and then down the arms and back up, then down the sides and the legs to the feet. It took him longer than he had expected. The saint shivered at the cold touch of the knife and she sobbed once at the sight of the blood, but by the time Hanley lifted the shroud of skin from her crimson body, she was resigned, satisfied even.

Hanley had spared her face and her genitals.

He spread the skin out to dry and, while he waited, he swabbed her raw body carefully with blood retardant. He whispered little words of love and thanks and desire to her. A smile played about her lips, but she said nothing.

It would be a week before he could put on her skin.

The general wrote to Hanley one last letter. “I can endure no more. I am possessed by you.”

Hanley put on the skin of the saint. His genitals fitted nicely through the gap he had left and the skin at his neck matched hers exactly. He walked the corridors and for once left no bloody tracks behind. He stood before mirrors and admired himself. He touched his breasts and his belly and his thighs and there was no blood on his hands.

"Thank you," he said to her. "It is my heart's desire fulfilled. I am inside you. I am possessed by you."

And then, in the night, he kissed her on the brow and on the cheek and finally on the mouth. He gazed deep and long into her eyes. He traced the lines of her eyebrows gently, with the tip of his index finger. "Such a beautiful face," he said. He pressed his palms lightly against her forehead, her cheekbones, her jaw. With his little finger he memorized the shape of her lips.

And then it was that Hanley, loved, desperate to possess and be possessed, staring deep into the green and loving eyes of the saint, saw that there can be no possession, there is only desire. He plucked at his empty skin, and wept.