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# Look back in wonder : how the endings of short stories can be their most powerful and effective distinguishing features

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**Look back in wonder: how the endings of short stories can be their most powerful and effective distinguishing features.**

Short fiction can make big demands of readers, often requiring them to do more imaginative work than if they were reading a novel and nowhere more so than at the ending of a story, where, as Joyce Carol Oates asserts: 'no matter its mysteries or experimental properties, it achieves closure – meaning that, when it ends, the attentive reader understands why' (1992, p.7). From the very first word, a successful short story needs not only to build up to its ending, but also to allow the reader to understand why the narrative ends where it does. However, the reader, as Oates points out, has to be 'attentive'. Without the reader's active participation, much of a short story's power remains latent.

What I'm getting at here is that the genre itself, the very nature of the short story, means that the three-dimensional wrap-around fictional dream of the realist narrative is much less likely to occur. Short fiction gives us glimpses and fragments of fictional realities, where the reader uses their own resources to reconstitute a richly detailed world from the concentrated stock that the narrative provides. I will attempt to illustrate these qualities with reference to two short stories by James Joyce: 'Two Gallants,' and 'The Dead'.

I first read Joyce's 'Two Gallants' when I was 18, and at the time, I just didn't get it. The abrupt ending and its veiled significance left me puzzled and frustrated. Possibly this was because I was too naïve and inexperienced to understand what Joyce was hinting at – and an oblique glint (literally in this story) is all we get. Now that I'm older and more cynical, I have access to common cultural experiences that allow me to complete the narrative for myself.

The two 'gallants' in the title, Corley and Lenehan, reveal themselves to be unpleasant chancers, one of whom is attempting to exploit a woman in order to supplement his income. The irony of the title is gradually revealed as we see the two of them in action. Joyce fills us in on the background to events by having us listen to

their conversation as Corley walks to meet a young woman who works as a servant, or 'slavey', in a big house who is 'a bit gone' on him (1956, p.54). Corley relates how the woman pays his tram fare and brings him cigars, presumably stolen from her employer. Lenehan raises concerns about her becoming pregnant and Corley reassures Lenehan that 'she's up to the dodge' (Ibid.) and that anyway, she doesn't know his real name, just in case she expects a marriage proposal.

The plot is set up when Lenehan asks, 'I suppose you'll be able to pull it off all right, eh?' (Ibid., p.55). We have no idea what he's referring to, apart from that it involves Corley and the young woman. A couple of pages later, Lenehan asks again: 'are you sure you can bring it off all right?' (Ibid., p.57). Joyce refuses to reveal what they're talking about – after all, both characters know what they mean, so it would sound staged and unconvincing to have them repeat this information for the benefit of the reader. We are left to guess. This sets up intrigue and narrative drive, keeping our interest as Lenehan, bursting to know the outcome of Corley's high-stakes encounter with the young woman, arranges to meet him afterwards.

The narrative then follows Lenehan as he fills in time, so we don't see what happens between Corley and the young woman. Still with Lenehan's point of view, we watch Corley take his leave of the 'young woman' on the street outside her employer's house. The young woman 'went down the steps into the area' (Ibid., p.64). We assume that she has entered the house via the servants' door. Corley waits, and then 'a woman' opens the 'hall door', which is at the top of the front steps, and clearly not the servants' entrance. This use of different doorways could be significant. Although many people read this story on the understanding that it is the same young woman who runs back out to Corley (Spark Notes, 2010, O'Malley, 2007), Joyce studiously refuses to identify the woman who emerges from the hall door. Subtle clues in the narrative plant the possibility of her not being the same person.

Throughout the story the narrator has referred to the object of Corley's attentions as 'the young woman', identifying her with the definite article, and an adjective. Why this sudden change to the indefinite article, without an adjective?

Joyce seems to make a deliberate distinction between the person who runs out with the coin, 'a woman', and 'the young woman' of whom Corley has just taken his leave. We are unsure whether we are seeing the same woman with whom Corley has spent the evening, or another, mysterious character whose relationship to the 'young woman' entrapped in Corley's deceptions can only be guessed at.

Joyce has shown us the story through Lenehan's point of view, so it is Lenehan who does not recognise the woman who comes down the steps. Given that he has had plenty of opportunity to observe Corley's quarry (we are given detailed descriptions of her distinctive dress earlier in the story), it seems unlikely that he would suddenly fail to know her. If we wish to persist with the belief that this woman is the same young woman who has spent the evening with Corley, then perhaps we can explain this curious narrative device as being intended to indicate the de-personalisation that has taken place: she has been useful in a transaction and now that the transaction is successfully completed, we no longer see her as a living, feeling individual. She has lost her youth.

Such possibilities unfold because Joyce has used point of view to withhold information. At one point he even uses Corley's bulk to stop us from seeing what happens: 'His broad figure hid hers from view,' (Ibid.) so that the reader, like Lenehan, has to chase after Corley and beg him to reveal the outcome of his scheme:

'Hallo, Corley!'

Corley turned his head to see who had called him, and then continued walking as before. Lenehan ran after him, settling the waterproof on his shoulders with one hand.

'Hallo, Corley!' he cried again.

He came level with his friend and looked keenly in his face. He could see nothing there.

'Well?' he said. 'Did it come off?'

They had reached the corner of Ely Place. Still without answering, Corley swerved to the left and went up the side street. His features were composed in stern calm. Lenehan kept up with his friend, breathing uneasily. He was baffled, and a note of menace pierced through his voice.

‘Can’t you tell us?’ he said. ‘Did you try her?’

Corley halted at the first lamp and stared grimly before him. Then with a grave gesture he extended a hand towards the light and, smiling, opened it slowly to the gaze of his disciple. A small gold coin shone in the palm. (Ibid., p.65).

When we are shown the gold coin shining in Corley’s palm, the narrator is answering the question ‘So what?’. This is where the narrator justifies ‘the value of the story they are telling, to demonstrate why these events are reportable.’ (Labov and Waletzky, 1967, cited by Bell, 1994, p.101). But although we understand that something significant has taken place, it is still up to us, the reader, to decide exactly what that is. Many possibilities present themselves:

The epiphany is the reader's who realizes visually (the gold coin) and acoustically (monologues) the degradation and the paralysis of Dublin, skillfully underlined by the aimless circular movement of the story (Valente, 2008).

The small gold coin shining in Corley’s palm has presumably been given to, or obtained for him by the young woman, possibly using a mysterious other woman as go-between. Has she stolen it from her employers, or has she given him her savings? What sob story has he told her in order to extract money like that? We know that some kind of morally repugnant transaction has taken place, but we are left to speculate upon what has happened, and invited to consider what may happen next. Will Corley now leave this woman, and pick on another, or will he stay with her until he drains her resources? Will she be discovered stealing, sacked, and forced into prostitution, as is intimated happened to another of Corley’s victims?

As I have attempted to illustrate with Joyce’s ‘Two Gallants’, if a story is successful, then it acts like a textual seed, and from it grows a forest of potential narratives, each occurring simultaneously in the imaginations of its readers. So much is left up to implication that the reader is required to do much more than many longer

fictions demand. Readers here can be seen actively creating the story, using their autonomy, assuming power over what happens, what they interpret, what they want it to mean.

As Rukmini Bhaya Nair points out, 'cleverness pleases us, especially our own' (2002, p.232). So one of the pleasures for us as readers of short fiction is when we 'get it' with minimal assistance from the author. We use the clues provided by the narrative and combine this with our own life experience and cultural knowledge to fill in the gaps. There is no closure, indeed there is no definitive ending. Whereas novels have to go to a great deal of effort to create and then explain their attempts to refuse closure, short fictions by their very nature present polymorphous versions of themselves, creating 'pleasure in the confusion of boundaries' (Haraway, 1991, p.150) as we encounter 'the play of a text that has no finally privileged reading' (Ibid., p.176).

For example, John Fowles in his novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* sets up a brilliantly executed Victorian romance, and only once he has hooked us with narrative drive, convincing characters and sumptuous historical detail, does he gradually begin to introduce the metafictional elements that blow the conventions of plot asunder. He concludes by offering us a choice of endings as part of his fight against the oppressive linearity of the book. But in order to set up a choice of ending, he needs rather laboriously to instruct the reader in how to deal with this choice. He concedes that the power of finality will force us to take whichever ending comes last: 'I cannot give both versions at once, yet whichever is the second will seem, so strong is the tyranny of the last chapter, the final, "real" version' (1994, p.390). The physical form of the book dictates that the final ending will have more authority and is therefore more likely to be the one which we will choose to 'believe'. The nature of the novel itself has thwarted his ambitions.

Short fictions do not have to labour under the burdens of length and linearity that Fowles encountered. Rather than readers spending hours over a period of days, weeks or months interfacing with a text, in the way that a traditional novel is

consumed, the physical interface with a piece of short fiction is much briefer; no longer, as Poe asserted, than can be read in a single sitting (2008, p.7). Reader expectation and the pressure of genre do not cause the same distortions. This is not a contested battle ground where the author has to die in order for the text to live. Instead, reader autonomy is a gift of the genre. In return for this gift, short fiction demands imaginative and intellectual engagement; it does not tolerate passivity.

As we have seen with Joyce's 'Two Gallants', readers are not consumers but co-creators, at least the equal of the author. The relative brevity and concentration of a short story allows a version of the narrative to be saved in the reader's own memory, where almost like a computer programme it begins to run, and in its interaction with the reader's unique imaginative and contextual circumstances, will live on for hours, days, maybe years, as something which no longer exists on paper, but in the memory circuits of readers who in a sense come to embody the text.

This is exactly my experience of Joyce's 'Two Gallants'. I first uploaded the text almost 20 years ago, and I have carried it around in my memory ever since, turning it this way and that as my life experience opened new perspectives on the narrative. Joyce's vivid, brilliantly detailed flashes of Dublin life play over and over in the mind of the reader, like a film that grows in depth and complexity with each replaying. It's no coincidence that my edition of *Dubliners* features a strip of photographic film on its covers.

I pause at this point to emphasise that I am not attempting to define the short story at the expense of the novel. The short story can be seen in its entirety all at once by both writer and reader. The novel, in contrast, has horizons so large that they cannot all be seen simultaneously. The reader, and indeed the writer, can only experience it a bit at a time. So while I am not saying that the novel is by definition a big ungainly brute of a form (although it can be), its sheer scale means that the concentrated brilliance of a well-crafted short story is something that it simply cannot sustain.

This sense of aesthetic difference between the novel and the short story is

articulated by Rust Hills:

A successful short story will thus necessarily show a more harmonious relationship of part to whole, and part to part, than it is usual ever to find in a novel. Everything must work with everything else. Everything enhances everything else, interrelates with everything else, is inseparable from everything else – and all this is done with a necessary and perfect economy (2000, p.4).

Because of the scale of the short story in relation to the novel, the reader is able to appreciate this harmonious relationship of elements, this feeling that nothing is wasted, that every word is absolutely necessary to the overall effect of the text. Because we can hold it all in our minds at once, we are able to have a ‘bird’s eye’ view, where we can appreciate the skill with which these elements are brought together for the production of a particular effect.

This quality is difficult to explain without reference to specific examples. I propose, therefore, to pause here while we examine James Joyce’s ‘The Dead’. I make no apology for referring to a text that has been written about so extensively by others, because it illustrates so effectively the quality that I am attempting to describe. Joyce provides such an effective example because he can be seen to adjust the elements of his stories, and our perceptions of them, until the ‘necessary and perfect economy’ that Rust Hills describes is achieved. One of the key techniques that Joyce employs in this process is what is often termed the ‘epiphany’:

Put simply, an epiphany is when a character in fiction comes to a significant, emotional or spiritual realisation. This will usually be self-realisation, but may also be about another character, or about a situation’ (Graham, 2007, p.97).

What Joyce exploits particularly well is a more complex aspect of the epiphany, where the reader is allowed to see and understand more of a situation than the character can, and has in effect a ‘meta-epiphany’ that comments upon and adds



poignancy to a character's moment of realisation. In this way, not only the character, but the reader too experiences a revelatory moment: 'So *that's* what she really thinks,' or 'Oh, he's monstrous!'

Joyce himself explained his use of epiphanies thus [my emphasis]:

First, we recognise that the object is one integral thing, then we recognise that it is an organised composite structure, a thing in fact: finally, *when the relation of the parts is exquisite*, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognise that it is that thing which it is (1955, p.213).

Like an epiphany itself, this explanation is nebulous, difficult to pin down. As Ailsa Cox says, 'Joyce is trying to put into words feelings that can barely be expressed, things you can't quite put your finger on' (2005, p.41). Joyce's complex statement requires a far more detailed analysis than I am able to attempt here. Instead, I wish to pull out one important idea: the relation of the parts of the story becoming exquisite. This echoes Rust Hill's suggestion about the defining quality of the short story: 'everything enhances everything else'.

In 'The Dead', point-of-view character Gabriel arrives at profound realisations about his marriage. Our view of Gabriel, Gabriel's view of himself, and his view of his wife, are all adjusted via a sequence of epiphanies until recognition is achieved, both by the character Gabriel, and also by the reader. Like a cameraman gradually shifting his focus, Joyce presents qualities that are at first fuzzy, and become gradually sharper, until their significance is clear.

Robert Graham's helpful analysis of epiphanies in 'The Dead' can be found on pages 97-101 of *How to Write Fiction (And Think About It)* (2007). I have taken Graham's analysis one stage further by mapping his observations on to Joyce's own explanation of how epiphanies can bring about the defining aesthetic qualities of the short story:

1. At the beginning of the story, Gabriel appears as the alpha male; plump,

successful, feeling slightly superior. *A one-dimensional view – the object is one integral thing.*

‘O, Mr. Conroy,’ said Lily to Gabriel when she opened the door for him, ‘Miss Kate and Miss Julia thought you were never coming. Good night Mrs. Conroy.’

‘I’ll engage they did,’ said Gabriel, ‘but they forget that my wife here takes three mortal hours to dress herself.’

He stood on the mat, scraping the snow from his goloshes... (1956, p. 201).

However, the first of several subtle adjustments soon unsettles Gabriel’s self-confidence, laying the groundwork for more profound realisations:

‘Tell me, Lily,’ he said in a friendly tone, ‘do you still go to school?’

‘Oh no, sir,’ she answered. ‘I’m done schooling this year and more.’

‘O, then,’ said Gabriel gaily, ‘I suppose we’ll be going to your wedding one of these days with your fine young man, eh?’

The girl glanced back over her shoulder at him and said with great bitterness:

‘The men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you.’

Gabriel coloured, as if he felt he had made a mistake and, without looking at her, kicked off his goloshes and flicked actively with his muffler at his patent-leather shoes (Ibid., p.202).

2. Via cumulative awkward little incidents, Gabriel is gradually made to feel much less certain of himself. Then he sees his wife on the stairs and finds her newly illuminated. The reader sees a more complex, vulnerable side of Gabriel – *an organised composite structure.*

He was in a dark part of the hall gazing up the staircase. A woman was standing near the top of the first flight, in the shadow also. He could not see her face but he could see the terra-cotta and salmon-pink panels of her skirt which the shadow made appear black and

white. It was his wife...he could hear little save the noise of laughter and dispute on the front steps, a few chords on the piano and a few notes of a man's voice singing.

He stood still in the gloom of the hall, trying to catch the air that the voice was singing and gazing up at his wife. There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of? If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude. Her blue felt hat would show off the bronze of her hair against the darkness and the dark panels of her skirt would show off the light ones. Distant Music he would call the picture if he were a painter (Ibid., pp. 239-240).

Joyce could have written: 'His wife was standing'. He chooses to say 'a woman' in shadow because we are seeing this from Gabriel's point of view, and Gabriel's perception of his wife, someone he thinks he knows well, is about to change profoundly. He sees her out of context, unfamiliar and beautiful. But the clue is when Gabriel knows that the panels of her skirt, which appear black and white in the shadows, are really terra-cotta and salmon-pink – if he were truly watching a stranger, he could not know that, whereas the implication here is that he has seen her get dressed and knows the details well. Ironically, while Gabriel is thinking these warm thoughts about his wife, she is thinking of a long dead lover, the memory prompted by the music she has heard.

3. At the close of the story, Gabriel is no longer the alpha male, but sad and hopeless as he realises that another man has first place in his wife's affections, and that he has never really known love. *When all parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognise that it is that thing which it is.*

The air of the room chilled his shoulders. He stretched himself cautiously alone under the sheets and lay down beside his wife. One by one, they were all becoming shades. Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age. He thought of how she who lay beside him had locked in her heart for so many years that image of her lover's eyes

when he had told her that he did not wish to live.

Generous tears filled Gabriel's eyes. He had never felt like that himself towards any woman, but he knew that such a feeling must be love... (Ibid., p.254- 255)

Gabriel realises that his wife has a whole secret emotional history to which he is not party. He also realises that he doesn't love his wife, and more bleakly still, that he has never loved any woman. The shadow of the dead lover, Michael Furey, seems to watch him as he lies next to Gretta. However, with his generous tears, Gabriel appears to reach a kind of acceptance that prevents the story from ending on a purely bleak note. The reader shares Gabriel's profound shift in understanding, but we also, over Gabriel's shoulder, appreciate Joyce's use of snow to indicate the possibility of transcendence, of equanimity in the face of tragedy, and the presence of beauty in the most unpromising circumstances. This is the culmination of a sequence of epiphanies, which ends, with the story, with one of the most famous passages in Irish Literature:

A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead (Ibid., p.256).

With breathtaking subtlety and skill, Joyce has used a series of epiphanies to adjust the complex elements of this story, until, like an image coming into focus, 'the relation of the parts is exquisite' (1955, p.213) and the qualities that Rust Hills describes are evident: 'Everything enhances everything else, interrelates with everything else, is inseparable from

everything else...' (2000, p.4).

While 'The Dead' is rightly lauded as one of the most beautifully crafted short stories in the English language, one of its achievements gets relatively little critical attention. *Dubliners* is a collection of 15 short stories. The links between the stories are obvious: each is firmly rooted in Dublin – the city itself becomes a constant which binds each of these stories together, a physical and spiritual presence with its trains and trams, pubs and shops, sights and sounds. Streets are specifically named, and characters often go for long walks, which are plotted out for us, so that even if we have never visited Dublin, we feel like we have been there, watching through Joyce's eyes.

It is possible to read *Dubliners* as a story cycle, a collection of tales that is linked thematically to such an extent that it could almost be read as a composite novel, the text of Dublin itself. We do not read it as a composite novel because the characters in each story are discrete to that story. Although we may recognise types of character that are common to more than one story, named individuals remain within the territory of their allotted narrative. There is no knock-on 'cause and effect' working at plot level that would prompt us to see the stories as related narratively. Nonetheless it is possible to see *Dubliners* functioning as a collective narrative, greater than the sum of its parts, and to read 'The Dead' as the climax to a complex cycle of linked stories.

Ann Morris and Maggie Dunn refer to composite texts as a 'literary work composed of shorter texts that though individually complete and autonomous are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles' (1995, cited by Zang, 2008). This definition could certainly be applied to *Dubliners*, and although perhaps skating over some subtle and complex interactions, it provides a useful description of Joyce's text – the organising principle of the city of Dublin is obvious. Less obviously, the final epiphany of 'The Dead' in which Gabriel comes to an understanding of his circumstances could be viewed not just as the final, illuminating epiphany of that story, but, as Francesca Valente (2008) suggests, 'The

*Dead* presents a broad epiphany which absorbs all the smaller epiphanies of the stories that come before.’

Thus throughout the collection, Joyce has manipulated not only our understanding of specific characters within discrete narratives, but he has also altered our perceptions of Dublin, and eventually of the human condition as with each cumulative epiphany he has, like a literary stage-manager, manoeuvred our awareness of reality. In each story he has adjusted the elements until their relation becomes exquisite. And in the collection as a whole, he has used epiphanies working sequentially across discrete narratives to make the stories elements in a larger, aesthetically pleasing body of text. In each case, it is the endings of the stories, and the ending of the collection as a whole that illuminates what has gone before, allowing these exquisite relations to become visible.

This is a startling achievement, and one that could not have been possible had Joyce attempted to write a novel about Dublin, which, of course, he did with *Ulysses* (Penguin, 1992). Never could the qualitative and quantitative differences between short fiction and the novel be more clearly illustrated than in a comparison of *Dubliners* and *Ulysses*: the concentrated, cinematic glimpses of the short story and the sprawling, encyclopaedic magnificence of the novel. And yet both texts attempt the same thing: to evoke the experience of Dublin. They show a writer working with genre, and pushing genre to break new ground, in order to attempt the effects that he strove to achieve.

Joyce was ahead of his time in many ways. In *Dubliners*, his brilliant, jagged fragments of city life pre-figure postmodern ideas about the role of the reader and the death of the author. And although story cycles are an ancient form, embodied perhaps most notably by the *Arabian Nights* (2010), Joyce’s move into this territory pre-figures what appears to be a postmodern obsession with fractured narratives, story-cycles and composite novels, which exploit the possibilities of the short story while helping themselves to aspects of the novel.

At the conclusion of this article I hope that we have also reached our own

modest illumination about the power of the ending to both define and enhance the short story as a literary practice. As Damon Knight says, 'Here, if anywhere, the author has a chance to make the reader understand what the whole meaning of the story is' (1997, p.174). There are of course many exceptions to what I have proposed, and I am aware that I have concentrated upon a particular sort of literary short fiction, rather than taking account of other types of genre fiction. No value judgement is intended by this omission, which is due only to the constraints of space. However a short story ends, be it by the final revelation in a sequence of epiphanies, a surprising plot twist, or the evocation of a mood or emotion, the writer who understands the power of the well-crafted ending has the ability to illuminate the preceding narrative, to make us look back in wonder.

5005 words

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