

Modernist (Hi)stories¹

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Abstract

Chronologically speaking, the rise of the modern short story coincides with the very years of inception of the Modernist movement in England. Formally speaking, aesthetic innovation as carried out by certain writers in their short narratives predates technical achievements in their most renowned novels. This round table will focus on some short narratives by Henry James, Virginia Woolf and Rebecca West, revolving around the idea of the short story as a privileged site for path-breaking literary innovations we normally identify as “modernist”, which encompass new attempts at viewing the literary tradition.

The rise of the modern short story in England in the last decade of the nineteenth-century was arguably concurrent with the emergence of literary modernism by virtue of various formal properties aiming at new ways of representing reality (Head, 1992; Pratt, 1981; Hanson, 1985; Flora, 1985). This round table focuses on the modernist short story as a privileged site for three illustrious practitioners –Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and Rebecca West– engaged in path-breaking literary innovations in their short narratives, which entail a subversive critique of moral, aesthetic, political and epistemological models inherited from the past.

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Esther Sánchez-Pardo charts the relation between formal innovation and social critique at stake in Henry James's "Figure in the Carpet" (1895), which also provides information on the knowledge and the epistemological assumptions of the age. In turn, Jorge Sacido focuses on how the modernist features of Virginia Woolf's short piece "The Mark on the Wall" stand in opposition with the traditional way of viewing and representing the world as a centred, hierarchical order which the narrator clearly identifies as "masculine". The I-narrator offers an alternative view by undergoing a process of dissolution, which is historically associated to World War I, and which revolves around the central motif of the tale: the mark on the wall. Finally, Pilar Sánchez Calle discusses Rebecca West's collection of short fiction *The Harsh Voice* (1935), which looks into the problems which women faced when occupying professional and economic spheres, traditionally reserved for men.

Contemporary theories of the novel are much indebted to Henry James's important elaboration at the turn-of-the-century. Anglo-American novel theory begins with James, his "Art of Fiction" (1884), and his prefaces to the New York Edition (1907-09) offer sensitive explorations of the novel's technical capabilities and its compositional problems. In a highly original and self-conscious body of fiction and theory about writers and critics James also laid the foundation of his now acknowledged place as one of the first literary modernists, for his work illustrates a central tenet of this movement: the necessary authority of the individual consciousness in defining and interpreting reality, in fiction as in life.

In a first person narration like "The Figure in the Carpet" (1895), the narrator himself appears as an ironic centre of revelation, belonging to the "great race of critics," the band of reviewers and readers James is exposing in the tale. The reader –himself an object of irony– at the end of the tale has to adjust himself to the ambiguous position of the narrator so as not to accept him as an ideal critic and be impelled to reread the tale. From the outset of the tale the reader finds himself in the world of literature. There is a novelist of great renown, Hugh Vereker, a young and hopeful critic who is also the unnamed narrator of the story; a second young and brilliant critic, George Corvick, and his fiancée, Gwendolen Erme, herself the author of a novel; a third less young and less brilliant critic, Drayton Deane; and a work to be reviewed.

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Nowhere perhaps than in “The Figure in the Carpet” does James better describe the impossible task of the literary critic, and what is quite brilliant in his story is that its very subject matter is the pursuit of a secret without which, James says, there can be no literary work. And in his story, the secret remains untold, there is a figure in the carpet, but no one will tell us what it is. I have just alluded to the “impossible task” of the critic and applauded James’s metaphor of a secret meaning condemned to remain secret. Does that mean that James’s fiction marks the end of literary criticism as we know it? Does that mean that the literature of the twentieth century, for some yet unknown historical reason, will no longer yield what we have up till now called its “truth”? I am afraid, in a way, it does, unless of course we exchange our “critical tools” for others which I would call “analytical” and epistemological rather than critical.

“The Figure in the Carpet” is a tale about a secret which seems to be the condition of literary achievement. The question could run thus: what is it that makes a literary work worthwhile? Or what is it that denotes “good” or “great” literature? It is of course the question of literary criticism in James’s time. But it is true we are facing a very difficult problem, for it concerns beauty, and it concerns truth, and also the relationship between the two. Rapidly, however, in “The Figure in the Carpet”, literary achievement is left aside and the query then becomes more general and amounts to something like this: “What is literature made of?”

But should not authors somewhat help the critics in their difficult task? This is what the young protagonist asks: “Don’t you think you ought to –just a trifle– assist the critic?” (James, [1895] 1969: 142). And Vereker’s answer is almost indignant: “Assist the critic? But this is what he does when he writes. ‘I’ve shouted my intention in his great blank face!’” (James, [1895] 1969: 142). And here of course we shall note the word “intention,” a clue, that even James’s writer does not know what his own secret, this impulse that makes him write, is. He then proceeds to speak of his “secret.” Again, we are given to understand that the “intention” that was mentioned earlier on cannot constitute an explanation sufficient in itself. Did James have some intuition about this? His Vereker, in any case, is far from unwise: “If my great affair’s a secret, that’s only because it’s a secret in spite of

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itself” (James, [1895] 1969: 143). In fact, what the reader is very clearly told here is that writing is not a matter of intention.

In James’s next step we are given to understand that the words a writer produces still remain somewhat mysterious to him. The thing is there, on the written page, but it cannot clearly be described. There is much in the eleven scenes of the tale that deserves analysis but I shall content myself with simply mentioning the obvious desire to remain in the dark, and then an obscure wish to learn what femininity is. In the end, as announced, the secret remains untold, and James cleverly concludes his story with the mention of “unappeased desire,” (James, [1895] 1969: 173) unaware, for once, that there is no other way to approach desire as such.

Virginia Woolf’s “The Mark on the Wall” (1917) appears much in tune with James’s foregrounding of an individual consciousness aiming at interpreting “reality”, along with seemingly fruitless efforts to unveil the secret meaning of an elusive object. Formally speaking, all the typically modernist features (subjective point of view, minimal plot, indeterminacy, etc.) of Virginia Woolf’s “The Mark on the Wall” stand in contrast with traditional ways of representing the world as a centred and perfectly hierarchical order, with what the narrator calls “the masculine point of view which governs our lives, which sets the standard” (Woolf, [1917] 1991: 86). The story contains two mutually exclusive perspectives, the masculine and the feminine, neatly condensed in the divergent ways in which the husband (who speaks at the very end) and the wife (the I-narrator) view the mark on the wall above the mantelpiece of their living room. One sees objectively, fixes the mark to a particular meaning (“a snail”), but is totally blind to the dramatic changes that the other perceives from her subjective and historically more alert point of view, a perspective she struggles to preserve by not standing up and looking closer, or from another angle, to the spot on the wall (which would also mean she would have to do her duty as a housekeeper and clean the dirt, a traditional feminine function she does not identify with: “I, not being a very vigilant housekeeper” (Woolf, [1917] 1991: 84). For the masculine point of view the traditional world remains intact: he announces he is going out to buy the newspaper, yet complains that “it’s no good buying newspapers. [...] Nothing ever happens. Curse this war; God damn this war! [...] All the same”, he adds in a tone of reprimand, “I don’t see why we should have a snail on our wall” (Woolf, [1917] 1991: 89). For

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the alternative feminine point of view, who does not see the snail but its many shadows, the old world –its values and standards, its social and natural hierarchies– is dissolving, becoming unsubstantial, turning into exorcised ghosts of the past by the event of the war. The narrator recalls her childhood in late Victorian times:

There was a rule for everything. The rule for tablecloths at that particular period was that they should be made of tapestry with little yellow compartments marked upon them [...]. How shocking, and yet how wonderful it was to discover that these real things [...] were not entirely real, were indeed phantoms, and the damnation which visited the disbeliever in them was only a sense of illegitimate freedom. *What now takes the place of those things I wonder, those real standard things?* Men perhaps, should you be a woman; *the masculine point of view* which governs our lives, which sets the standard, which establishes Whitaker's Table of Precedency, *which has become, I suppose, since the war half a phantom to many men and women, which soon, one may hope, will be laughed into the dustbin where the phantoms go,* the mahogany sideboards and the Landseer prints, Gods and Devils, Hell and so forth, *leaving us all with a sense of illegitimate freedom - if freedom exists.* (Woolf, [1917] 1991: 86. Emphases added)

The demise of the traditional world is rendered through a subjective perspective which is subjective precisely because, on the one hand, it already in her childhood was divided as to the consistency of that very world –“to discover that these real things [...] were not entirely real, were indeed phantoms”– and, on the other, it is traversed by a desire (“I suppose”, “one may hope”) for change, for emancipation from that stuffy patriarchal order of things. The world to which the masculine character clings to is structured ethico-politically around fixed hierarchies (“Table of Precedency”) and the division of roles, with women confined to the domestic realm as *housemaids*,

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vigilant *housekeepers*, or caring *housewives*; epistemologically around the dogmas of objectivism and positivism (the mark is a “snail”, period); and aesthetically by the concentration on external “reality”, like the novelists Woolf dubbed “materialists” (1994: 160).

The aesthetics endorsed by the story opposes the one derived from an objectivist view of reality which naturalises the subjection of all to their appointed places. The importance of aesthetics is best exemplified by a metaliterary passage in which the I-narrator dwells upon the creation of a narrative from a passing impression or idea. First, on thinking of “Shakespeare” she builds a scene from a purely external and conventional perspective in which she sees the playwright at work through the window, but has no access to the “shower of ideas [that] fell perpetually from some very high Heaven down through his mind” (Woolf, [1917] 1991: 85). She discards this mode: “But how dull this is, this historical fiction!” (85); then comes a story triggered by “a pleasant track of thought” which “are not thoughts directly praising oneself” (85). She also rejects it because the character –narrating the story in the first person– is just an idealised projection of the author, as in a looking-glass. And finally, the view of individuals as empty holes with no inner richness and onto which each fellow human being pours his/her impressions she proposes as the framework for a future generation of novelists:

Suppose the looking-glass smashes, the image disappears, and the romantic figure with the green of the forests depths all about it is there no longer, *but only that shell of a person which is seen by other people* - what an airless, shallow, bald, prominent world it becomes! [...] *And the novelists of the future will realise more and more the importance of these reflections, for of course there is no one reflection but an almost infinite number; those are the depths they will explore, those the phantoms they will pursue, leaving the description of reality more and more out of their stories, taking knowledge of it for granted.* (Woolf, [1917] 1991: 85-86. Emphases added)

Virginia Woolf’s “The Mark on the Wall” shares Rebecca West’s aim to bring to the fore women’s need to break away with subjection by entering a public realm, traditionally reserved to men, as

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shown in West's collection of short fiction *The Harsh Voice* (1935). The protagonists of the first story, "Life Sentence," are Corrie Dickson and Josephine Houblon. The narration begins with Corrie's attempt to cancel his wedding with Josephine because he does not care enough for her "in that way" (West, 1982: 12). But she convinces him of going through with it and he accepts his future marriage as a "life sentence" (West, 1982: 15). After inheriting a large sum from her father, Josephine becomes a business woman and begins to invest in property and real estate projects whereas Corrie remains modestly successful. Their lack of communication and the disappointment of gender expectations (Norton, 2000: 24) increases Josie's and Corrie's resentment towards the other and contributes to the failure of their marriage.

The following story, "There Is No Conversation," also explores the results of gender reversal in the relationship between Étienne de Sevenac, a French aristocrat in his fifties, and Nancy Sarle, an American middle-age woman. Étienne meets the narrator in Paris and lets her know about his financial ruin. He points Nancy Sarle as the cause of his present condition and is eager to tell the narrator all the details of their affair. Étienne is a dilettante who has always been obsessed with age and beauty and who considers any work the province of inferiors (Norton, 2000: 26). Usually, he seeks the company of young women but in a moment of loneliness and boredom he meets Mrs. Sarle. Nancy accepts Étienne's advances and he assumes she has become dependent on him. In fact, Nancy is a railway executive and owner, and when she discovers that he does not love her, she takes her revenge in financial operations that destroy the value of Étienne's railroad stock, or at least this is how Étienne interprets her actions.

After revealing that she had been Étienne's wife for ten years, the narrator expresses her deep disappointment with the successful and self-confident Nancy Sarle. The narrator hoped that, despite all her achievements an independence in a world of men, Mrs Sarle would be like most women: an incurable romantic who cherished a man's love more than anything else. But Mrs Sarle had been smarter than the narrator and had not made the mistake of falling in love with "a cheap and empty man." (West, 1982: 129).

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“The Salt of the Earth” could be considered a murder tale, however, it fits into the general pattern of *The Harsh Voice* by having an aggressive female character. Alice Pemberton lives a traditional existence as a wife, but is not completely satisfied with that role. She has no children and tries to run her relatives’ lives, usually against their will (Norton, 2000: 26-27). West seems to suggest that if Alice had taken advantage of the working opportunities that were available for women at her time, her life would have been full and she would not have spent her days meddling in her relatives’ affairs. Alice’s husband eventually poisons her because he feels powerless to stop her. In this story, the man triumphs over the woman, although Jimmy’s victory means the defeat of his own freedom (Norton, 2000: 27).

In “The Abiding Vision,” women are only wives and mistresses, but they are not entirely happy. We are told the story of Sam Hartley, who is the personification of the American dream: the self-made man who has fought his way up from Butte, Montana to Park Avenue, New York. Sam is married to Lulah, the woman who has been with him since the beginning and who has shared the good and bad times till Sam has reached economic and social success. He has often been unfaithful to Lulah and when the story starts, he meets a new girl, Lily, who becomes his lover.

In their selflessness and love for Sam, Lulah and Lily represent the positive side of women as helpmates in a way that Josie, Nancy and Alice, the protagonists of the other stories, do not (Norton, 2000: 28). But Sam’s success is achieved at the expense of these women’s sacrifice of their dreams and talents. When Lulah falls ill, from time to time she remarks “Pa, I want to go to college. I want to go to the State University” (West, 1982: 213), and also “Book. Book. School-book” (West, 1982: 221). Sam knew that his wife had always wanted to go to college, but that her mother’s sickness had put an end to this ambition, however, he does not seem to understand all the sadness this impossible aspiration involves. The story’s ending is ambivalent because Sam overcomes his financial problems and thanks Lily for her support in the difficult times, but in his mind he is longing for another woman young and fresh, without the signs of Lily’s physical decadence.

West creates interesting female characters like Josie and Nancy Sarle whose professional and economic spheres are expanding. However, their professional success interferes negatively in their relationships with their husbands or lovers, basically because these men

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are too weak to accept that women's activities can move beyond the domestic field and feel humiliated in their self-esteem. The situation is not better for those protagonists who accept the traditional role of wife. They are either punished for going beyond certain limits in their attention to their families, like Alice Pemberton, or they acquiesce in their own subordination, like Lulah and Lily. West pointed out the difficulties experienced by many women who, like herself, wanted to earn their own money and have a presence in the public sphere, and, at the same time, wished to start or keep a love relationship. *The Harsh Voice* anticipates many of the challenges modern women would experience in the following decades and suggests some of the themes and issues that would be prominent in women's literature and discussed by feminism in the future.

In short, these three writers show in the short narratives here examined a serious attempt to question traditional epistemological, social and literary patterns to understand and represent the world and the experience of it, while also suggesting new models that would suit best a modern sensibility, by exploring "new forms for our new sensations" (Woolf, 1987: 59).

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