

Story into Short Story: Cultural Roots and Cultural Work
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Frank O'Connor, in his influential 1963 book The Lonely Voice, worked to distinguish the short story from what he characterized as the “wild improvisation” of storytelling. Instead, O'Connor insisted that the short story “began, and continues to function, as a private art intended to satisfy the standards of the individual, solitary, critical reader.”¹ His insistence on divorcing the literary genre from any connection to folk traditions seems to stem from an anxiety that emphasizing the story's orality might only buttress the beliefs of a literary culture that prized the novel over the short story. For O'Connor, as for many critics of the short story, the relationship of the literary genre to the folk tale was pivotal in determining its cultural worth. Often seeing themselves as defenders of an underappreciated form, many short story critics interpreted the genre's heritage—or lack thereof—in storytelling as key to determining its reception on the larger literary scene. The treatment of the story's lineage tells a larger tale about the way the short story is valued in contemporary American culture.

O'Connor's stance is unusual among short story critics, for others generally trace the link from the written story to its origins in the spoken tale with great pride. This approach offers the advantage of presenting the short story as more ancient and established than the novel through the historical weight of its (supposedly) unbroken line of evolution from folktales to the modern form. Charles May, one of the two most important contemporary theorists of the short story, claims that the genre's genesis is in brief episodic narratives. According to May, anthropologists

¹ Frank O'Connor, The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story (Cleveland: The World Publishing Co., 1963) 114. O'Connor also, however, repeatedly uses the term storytelling to describe the process of writing both short stories and novels, calling the former “pure storytelling” and the latter “applied storytelling” (27). It's as if he can only link stories to storytelling if novels can be treated the same way, so that the connection to oral tradition itself is not used to denigrate the genre he champions.

have determined that such narratives predate the evolution of the epic, the ancestor of the novel.² In addition, some critics posit that the short story is the literary genre that grew organically out of humans' innate need to tell stories about themselves, lending the force of nature to their argument. Representative of this school of thought is Horacio Quiroga's sweeping statement that "as long as the human language is our preferred vehicle of expression, man will always make stories, because the short story is the one natural, normal, and irreplaceable form of storytelling."³

Many of the earliest critics of the short story devoted substantial efforts to understanding the relationship between the literary genre and the act of storytelling. Warren Walker, in his article tracing the roots of short stories to oral traditions, notes that Poe developed the term prose tale (which he used in his famous review of Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales) in order to differentiate the printed from the spoken form, because the two were so easily confused.⁴ Brander Matthews, writing nearer the turn of the twentieth century, coined the name short-story (hyphenated), a term that he thought better expressed the "writtenness" of the form than Poe's expression, for a tale was, to Matthews' mind, inherently oral. Yet Ian Reid, in his history of the short story, notes that the term short story did not appear in reference to a literary product until the 1933 OED supplement. The history of short story criticism, and particularly American short story criticism, is fraught with the distinction—or lack thereof—between the oral and written story. (Interestingly, the confusion created by the similarity between the terms story and short

² Charles E. May, The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995) 1.

³ Horacio Quiroga, "Horacio Quiroga on the Short Story," trans. Margaret Sayers Peden, University of Denver Quarterly 12 (1977).

⁴ Warren S. Walker, "From Raconteur to Writer: Oral Roots and Printed Leaves of Short Fiction," The Teller and the Tale: Aspects of the Short Story (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech P, 1982); Edgar Allan Poe, "Review of 'Twice-Told Tales By Nathaniel Hawthorne'," Great Short Works of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

story is not one unique to English, as Mary Louise Pratt has pointed out: in both Spanish and French, for example, the term referring to an oral tale is the same as that used to describe the literary genre.⁵)

My aim in this paper is not to simply rehearse the various arguments for the short story's basis in oral tales or its independence from them. Rather, the fact that there has been so much attention to the genre's relationship to orality signals that there are significant cultural stakes to the argument. What are the implications of linking the short story—or not—to oral traditions? If, as Pratt observes, "the novel was born affirming its own writtenness,"⁶ does an understanding of the short story as a historically oral form merely re-position it as the red-headed stepchild where the novel is the favorite son? Or do the story's ties to orality offer it an openness both to invention and to the appearance of new voices on the literary scene?

It may help to understand a few of the perspectives on the relationship between orality and literacy (writtenness) in order to frame the discussion. Walter J. Ong, for one, has written extensively on the evolution of oral societies into literate ones. If this description sounds as if one term is already being privileged, then you have grasped one of Ong's major arguments. While he recognizes that the condition of orality—that is, the state of a society in which communication is predominantly oral—has certain advantages, among them the power of the speaker over the writer and the possibility of a limited range of artistic accomplishments, Ong contends that only literacy can allow a culture to flourish and store its knowledge, indeed, in order for civilization to continue.

⁵ Brander Matthews, "The Philosophy of the Short-Story," Pen and Ink: Papers on Subjects of More or Less Importance (New York: Longmans, Green, 1888); Ian Reid, The Short Story, Critical Idiom, ed. John D. Jump, vol. 37 (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1977) 1; Mary Louise Pratt, "The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It," The New Short Story Theories, ed. Charles E. May (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1994) 94.

⁶ Pratt, "The Short Story," 107.

Without the powers of writing, Ong writes, illiterate subjects are limited in their capabilities to think abstractly (for example, a circle is a plate, or a square a door, but neither belongs to an abstract category) and have little incentive to remember information that is not directly pertinent to their daily survival (such as the fact that there was a previous ruler of their country). Only the greatest of heroic subjects and the grandest epics are worth remembering; everyday people are forgotten in the need to allocate memory to events and people that are relatively easy to remember. Whereas primary oral cultures (cultures with limited literate membership) overvalue sound and the power of naming and tend to be conservers of knowledge rather than creators of new knowledge, literate cultures can develop kinds of knowledge that simply aren't possible in an oral system that requires that all information be stored in memory. The freedom from memory's limitations through writing means that the technology facilitates a new kind of thought, one in which the individual can follow ideas in multiple directions without the fear of being unable to retrieve one's train of thought. Books, moreover, present a forum for knowledge that cannot be disputed with the author, for the author is always removed from the scene of reading, unavailable for argument in the way that a speaker is. According to Ong, literacy confers upon a writer an authority impossible to achieve in a primarily oral culture.⁷

Although Ong's approach to literacy and orality shares little with poststructuralists such as Derrida, the two agree on the primacy of literacy.⁸ Perhaps the iconic moment of Derrida's privileging of writing over speech comes in the title of his article "Différance," in which the

⁷ Walter J. Ong, The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History (New Haven: Yale UP, 1967); Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word, New Accents Series (London: Methuen, 1982).

⁸ Derrida is addressing writing in particular, while Ong's use of the term literacy frequently encompasses manuscript writing, the technology of print, and electronic forms. While Ong claims, in Orality and Literacy, that Derrida's formulation applies to print rather than manuscript writing, this distinction is not important for the purposes of my argument.

word itself both presents and represents the difference that cannot be recognized aurally.⁹ In the book Of Grammatology, Derrida lays out the thinking behind this move. Writing is necessarily prior to literacy, for the “exteriority” of language, language as an object, requires that the sign expressed in language refer to a concrete entity (the word on the page).¹⁰ Like Ong, Derrida argues that writing is necessary to the pursuit of knowledge, and that writing can only be the vehicle of such a pursuit because writing precedes language. Without writing, declares Derrida, historicity as a concept could not exist; “writing opens the field of history—of historical becoming.”¹¹ But even while writing facilitates new kinds of understandings of the world, it also marks a move away from language as a possession of the masses toward a point at which language is used as a tool to wield power. Writing centralizes power in the hands of writers at the expense of speakers. Writing literally confers authority.

Working from either Derrida or Ong, then, one may argue that writing is more powerful than speech. This valuation poses an obvious problem, though, since those outside the mainstream—women, people of color, working-class people and the poor, to name only a few groups—have often been cut off from writing and publishing. How can orality be celebrated when it is a feature of “illiterate”—and thus immature and inferior—cultures and groups? Feminist writers such as H el ene Cixous and Trinh Minh-Ha, with varying degrees of success, have attempted to undo the hierarchy of orality and literacy that Ong established in his work in order by questioning the privileging of the written word.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Diff erance," trans. Alan Bass, Margins of Philosophy (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1982).

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Corr. ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998).

¹¹ Derrida, Of Grammatology 27.

In Cixous' writing, orality and literacy are often so closely intertwined that it is difficult to define the difference; she uses the confusion of speech and writing to avoid reifying the kind of hierarchy that Ong and Derrida establish. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous confounds the boundaries between writing and speech even while she affirms that both have radical possibilities for a woman. She writes of a "new insurgent writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history." As Cixous elaborates, this act will be "marked by woman's seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression. To write and thus to forge for herself the anti-logos weapon."¹² Women's writing, in Cixous' formulation, is a way to challenge both history's silencing of women through its refusal to hear their voices and the rational conventions of patriarchal language. Both speaking and writing present opportunities for revolution, to Cixous' thinking; she calls for "women to start scoring their feats in written and oral language."¹³ Although she recognizes writing and speaking as separate acts, she also tends to treat them as overlapping areas on the same spectrum, refusing to set boundaries between them.

Trinh, too, refuses boundaries in her use of the terms speech and writing. Her style, as Herman Rapaport has noted, tends to fuse orality and literacy; she often uses, without warning, the voice of an imagined critic.¹⁴ (The distinction between Trinh's voice and that of her critic might be clearer if hers were an oral text.) Trinh is particularly concerned with the uses that the West makes of storytelling as a result of its overappreciation for literacy. Rather than

¹² Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, New French Feminisms: An Anthology, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1981) 250.

¹³ Cixous, "Laugh," 251.

¹⁴ Herman Rapaport, "Deconstruction's Other: Trinh T. Minh-ha and Jacques Derrida," Diacritics 25.2 (1995).

recognizing the power of tales for themselves, Trinh laments, oral stories have been appropriated to “teach children the tales their fathers knew”—that is, storytelling has been co-opted by patriarchy and reduced to an educational device. When the story becomes merely an educational tool, elements of fancy or magic are conveyed in such a way that young listeners are never confused about what might happen in “real” life. Imaginative, fantastic tales that could inspire children are reduced to falsehoods, and those who tell them are reduced to craftspeople rather than artists. For Trinh, storytelling is an act of life; it has magical powers, but not just to convey information—to imagine and create new worlds.¹⁵

Although both Cixous and Trinh attempt to disrupt the hierarchy of writing over speaking, they cannot completely escape reinforcing it; for one thing, the very writtenness of their work is evidence that, in scholarly culture, literacy trumps orality. Trinh’s argument about the uses of storytelling exposes another inherent problem in the cultural value of orality: oral tales are seen as less trustworthy and factual than written materials. (That’s why, perhaps, I’m reading this paper aloud, with the text and footnotes printed out to support me should anyone question my argument.) Both Ong and Derrida believe that writing is necessary for both the concept and the practice of history; oral tradition bears little weight in the transmission of factual information. It is too susceptible to the fancies of the audience. When the short story is opposed to history, through the binary relationship that inevitably develops from its ancestry in the oral story, it loses weight again. Stories are merely fiction, but history is truth.

While some of us may disagree with such statements—we may not, for example, believe that history is any more “true” than literature—these are ultimately characterizations of the culture in which the short story operates today. It may seem that the abstraction of history vs.

¹⁵ Although Trinh doesn't mention it, an excellent example of storytelling's magical powers can be found in the character of Uncle Julius in Charles Chesnut's The Conjure Woman (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1899).

short story, fact vs. fiction, seems to have little applicability to the concrete presence of the story. But just three weeks ago, The Atlantic Monthly's editors announced that they will no longer publish fiction in each issue. Instead, they will have an annual fiction special issue. Their readers, the editors said, just aren't interested in fiction anymore; they want facts. To that end, the magazine will now focus on essays. This is not an isolated case, either. Men's magazines, like The Atlantic, have shifted away from publishing fiction. Esquire, for example, which used to publish many fine stories, and was a reliable source for stories recognized in the two major annuals devoted to the genre (the Best American Short Stories and O. Henry Prize Stories), has markedly decreased the amount of fiction it has published in the last twenty-five years.¹⁶ Women's magazines aren't any better. Outlets such as Redbook, Mademoiselle, and Cosmo also used to appear frequently in the story annuals, but the last time a story from one of them appeared in a prize anthology was 1995. The Atlantic is merely one of the last in a long line of magazines to all but abandon the literary short story.

To conclude, then, I'd like to suggest that the position one takes on the short story's relationship to oral tradition is no longer so important to the understanding of the genre as is an investigation of the implications of that relationship. Whether we believe that the short story is always, at heart, the child of oral tales or that the literary form has broken away from its heritage altogether, the short story's links to orality have powerful repercussions for its role in contemporary culture. Particularly now, the novel is in its ascendancy and nonfiction is flying off the shelves, the short story's bears a lesser status vis-à-vis both genres—both its ties to orality opposed to the novel's physicality as a written object and the story's fictional nature compared

¹⁶ William Abrahams, Introduction, Prize Stories 1979: The O. Henry Awards, ed. William Abrahams (New York: Doubleday, 1979) 10. Indeed, a recent edition of NPR's "The Connection" touted studies that found that men preferred nonfiction books to fiction. "Buy the Book," The Connection, narr. Michael Goldfarb (National Public Radio, Boston: WBUR, 23 June 2004).

against the factuality of nonfiction. Critics of the short story genre accomplish little, I would argue, by debating the origins of the form. If they do not start paying attention to the cultural role of the genre, the kinds of cultural work it can do, they may soon find themselves with a disappearing subject.

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