Reading for Storyness
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Reading for Storyness: Preclosure Theory, Empirical Poetics, and Culture in the Short Story.

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In the history of short story criticism and theory, the “littleness” of the genre has been sometimes extolled and sometimes excused. Short fiction has often been seen as a minor form, with nothing to offer the narratologist or the cultural historian that cannot be found in the weightier novel. From various points of view over the years, I have argued that the form’s enduring power and interest can be partially explained by the peculiarities of the way it is processed by human beings with story competence. Novels, even those that embed any number of smaller stories, do not offer the kind of reading experience I have been describing. They do not depend so directly on the sense of storyness, nor do they modulate emotions through putative stories that rest within each other, yet operate serially.

Whether all short stories work this way, I cannot say, although I suspect they can be seen to do so, with a little help from preclosure study. The results, I believe, will always add weight to the actual story, no matter how slight, or exaggerated, or type-bound it may seem by virtue of being short. This is a different activity from what used to be called archetype hunting. It begins in a real-time, word-by-word, serialized processing of an individual text. What it retrieves is, first of all, a sequence of putative stories that may be triggered by cognitive schemata but that can be recognized—and made available for discussion—as generic story types. This approach through genre rather than by theme allows a text’s storyness to “work” on the reader before its message is formulated. Thus, there is a greater chance that that message will not be defined in advance of the reading.
Naturally, I am no more assumption-free than any other critic or scholar. Even when I am interpreting the findings of large groups of readers, and certainly when I am using my own preclosure choices, I am guided by my own set of values and experiences. I offer my readings for whatever they may be worth, but they are not the argument that matters. If preclosure study leads another reader to a different conclusion about any story I’ve discussed, the purpose of the book will have been served just as fully as if the interpretation agreed with mine.

The history of any field can look at times like a Möbius strip, in which old and new theories are facings of each other with no clear line of progress. From Aristotle onward, how often we have tried to get at the essentials of genre, as both a literary-critical notion and as a functioning set of categories. Now, however, this inquiry is out of fashion in the academy, where emphasis has shifted to the social, cultural, political, economic, historical, and material conditions that have constructed so many of the meanings we once thought inherent. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, why is it not simply redundant or reactionary to use genre as a reading frame?

If I were so inclined, I might say that I am merely offering a corrective, a “return to basics” in a time when proliferating ideologies, originating in the noblest challenge to entrenched power, have become, in their turn, predictable and repressive. However, I am making a somewhat bolder claim. I am trying to change the perception that genre means taxonomy, or that genre is a slippery set of labels with at best a fuzzy logic. For me, genre is a heuristic, a reading strategy that is always enlightening. This approach has led to some fruitful reexaminations of individual texts, but these readings are a means to an end. What I am trying to do in this book is to nudge the study of genre into the neighborhood of cognitive science, which, along with genetics, may well be the signature discipline of the next hundred years. As I have stated repeatedly, the studies in this book are in no way scientific. Yet they respond, in part, to the same trends that led to the International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature. As recently as 1998, the Executive Council of the Modern Language Association approved a Discussion Group on “Cognitive Approaches to Literature.” My interest in this work, along with a preference for broadly accessible, relatively jargon-free models for interacting with texts, has led me to eschew the more prevalent discourses of poststructuralist theory in favor of my own version of empirical study linked to literary theory.
Even within the domain I have sketched out, there are, of course, whole areas I have not explored, such as the synapse between genre theory and artificial intelligence. It will seem, too, that my approach is limited to a print culture that theorists say is waning, although books are big business. My “reader” is a person who turns page after page, who does not skip from screen to screen, from narrative bite to narrative bite, at the click of a mouse or the touch of a stylus. I do not rule out the future application of preclosure study to the narratology of hypertext, but my subject here is the reading of stories as it is still mostly done, and as it is still mostly studied, even by cognitive scientists.

Much of what I have gleaned from their work has been so transformed, so loosely adapted, as to be unrecognizable to the scientists who inspired me. For I am neither a scientist nor a science historian. I have a story to tell about the value of preclosure study. In my effort to penetrate beyond the enveloping jargon of contemporary literary studies, in my yearning to reach the simplest functions of the experience-processing mind, I have come round to the concerns that the makers of art, the writers of short stories, have never left behind. I am once again talking about a shapeliness that facilitates reception. I am talking about aesthetics with a cognitive resonance.

All art transubstantiates life, condensing the field of reference, putting its audience through a symbolically mediated but intensified experience. Theorists have long noted the ways in which the short story condenses “much in little” through selectivity, ellipsis, foreshortening, and synecdoche. Hemingway’s famous image of the mostly submerged iceberg, to be inferred from its tip, reminds us that this genre requires a proactive reader. However, his metaphor assumes that the extra or full meaning of the story is amassed below the surface. Finding it requires a calculus of inference.

In contrast, the notion of serial preclosure locates the hidden weight of the text within the folds of the narrative; it assumes that the recovery of this meaning is guided by our model for storyness, a widely bestowed competence, as much as by our ability to plumb symbols, a result of elite training. The reading process itself becomes the means by which our shared humanity is triggered, our reactions modulated, and our insights refined as we move through short stories.