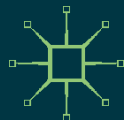


IRISH WOMEN  
WRITERS AND  
THE MODERN  
SHORT STORY

*Elke D'hoker*



# Irish Women Writers and the Modern Short Story



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*For my children: Jonathan, Lucas, Leander and Jessica*



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63 (2014), pp. 115–30. I am grateful to the editors of these journals for granting me permission to reprint my work.

Writing papers and articles is one thing, but finding the time to write a book is quite another—especially if that time is fragmented by so many other jobs: teaching, writing grant applications, supervising, administration and endless meetings. Since sabbaticals are hard to come by in my university, in the end I ‘bought’ a semester free of teaching by taking up parental leave so that I could finally write the book. My greatest thanks therefore go to my husband, who encouraged me to take this step and always believed I could do it. I am also indebted to my parents, who are always ready to help me out in the daily struggle of combining a family and a career. This book is dedicated to my children—Jonathan, Lucas, Leander and Jessica—who did not seem to mind that my parental leave was not entirely devoted to their care, or, if they did, were easily consoled by the promise of one day seeing their names appear in a ‘real book’.

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## Introduction

Jane Barlow, George Egerton, Somerville and Ross, Elizabeth Bowen, Mary Lavin, Maeve Brennan, Edna O'Brien, and Mary Beckett: these are only some of many Irish women writers to have achieved widespread popularity and critical acclaim with their short fiction since the late nineteenth century. In the standard histories and theories of the Irish short story, however, their achievements have often been side-lined: limited to one or two small chapters, as in Patrick Raffroidi and Terence Brown's seminal *The Irish Short Story* (1979) and James Kilroy's *The Irish Short Story: A Critical History* (1984) or ignored altogether as in Deborah Averill's *The Irish Short Story from George Moore to Frank O'Connor* (1982). In these and other works, indeed, the history and conception of the Irish short story are constructed around such "masters of the genre" such as Carleton, Moore, Joyce, O'Connor, O'Flaherty and O'Faoláin, and women writers are at best but a footnote to this history (Kiely 2011, 8). This is also the picture we find in the standard, often reprinted, anthologies of the Irish short story: Frank O'Connor's *Classic Irish Short Stories* (1957), Vivian Mercier's *Great Irish Short Stories* (1964), Benedict Kiely's *The Penguin Book of Irish Short Stories* (1981) and William Trevor's *The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories* (1991). In all of those, the number of short stories by women writers amounts to less than a fifth of the stories.

However, there are signs that this monochrome picture is changing. Thanks to the recovery work of feminist writers and critics, Irish women's short fiction has been promoted in such anthologies as Janet Madden-Simpson's *A Woman's Part: An Anthology of Short Fiction By and About*

*Irish Women 1890–1960* (1984), Caroline Walsh's *Virgins and Hyacinths* (1993) and *Territories of Voice: Contemporary Short Stories by Irish Women Writers* (1991), edited by Louise DeSalvo, Kathleen Walsh D'Arcy and Katherine Hogan. More recently, two fascinating anthologies have represented short stories by Irish women writers from the nineteenth century to the present: *Cutting the Night in Two* (2001), edited by Evelyn Conlon and Hans-Christian Oeser, and *The Long Gaze Back* (2015), edited by Sinéad Gleeson. These anthologies have been of seminal importance both in creating an awareness of the long-standing involvement of Irish women writers with the genre of the short story, and in encouraging contemporary efforts in the form. Equally important have been the recovery attempts devoted to the work of individual writers. Over the past two decades, story collections by Mary Lavin and George Egerton have been brought back into print (Egerton 2006; Lavin 2011, 2012), while the short stories of Maeve Brennan and Elizabeth Bowen have been newly collected in several volumes (Brennan 1998, 2000; Bowen and Hepburn 2008). This in turn has produced new author studies about the short fiction of these writers and, hence, a better understanding of their work (Lassner 1991; Laing et al. 2006; D'hoker 2013b). Finally, two recent publications, Heather Ingman's *A History of the Irish Short Story* (2009) and Anne Enright's *The Granta Book of the Irish Short Story* (2010), consider and include Irish women writers on a par with their male colleagues.

Yet, however valuable these works are, they have not yet been able to dislodge the narrow and normative conception of the Irish short story which has held sway since the middle of the twentieth century. Based on the work of a handful of canonical male writers, this conception is often alien to the short fiction of Irish women writers and, as I will argue, it has exacerbated their marginalization in many ways. It is important, therefore, not just to open up literary histories and anthologies to the short stories of women writers, but also to consider how their work challenges the norms and orthodoxies of the Irish short story itself. As Patricia Coughlan notes about Irish literature in general, "There remains [...] a need for persistent intervention in the canon to redress the occlusion, omission and marginalization of women writers by those male-focused metanarratives which still dominate perceptions of Irish literary tradition" (2008, 1). Hence, the double aim of this book is to study the short fiction of Irish women writers and to see how their work challenges the established understanding of the Irish short story tradition.

For a general idea of this standard critical conception of the Irish short story, it suffices to peruse the Prefaces of the classic Irish short fiction anthologies just mentioned: by Mercier, Trevor, Kiely and O'Connor. In an attempt to explain the standing and success of the short story in Ireland, these editors often rehearse the same arguments: the Irish short story emerged out of a vibrant oral storytelling tradition and inherited its emphasis on plot and on voice (Mercier 1992, 8), the genre came natural to the Irish, given their "instinctive" "flair" for storytelling (Trevor 1991, ix, xv), and it could prosper because of the absence of a strong novel tradition (O'Connor 1957, ix). From these editorials and the stories they preface, the image emerges of the Irish short story as a traditional form, rooted in a common Gaelic heritage and general storytelling culture. It is a form that is shaped by Irish history and reality and comments on it, often from an off-centric, marginalized perspective. Indeed, protagonists of the Irish short story are often judged to be isolated or alienated from the community around them (Mercier 1992, 17). As a rule, Frank O'Connor is quoted in support of these statements. Indeed, the presiding image of the Irish short story is heavily indebted to O'Connor's landmark study, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story*. Because of the profound and prolonged influence of this book on the conceptualization of the Irish short story tradition—and its attendant marginalization of the work of women writers—it is instructive to take a closer look at O'Connor's main theories.

### FRANK O'CONNOR'S OUTSIDERS

In the Introduction to *The Lonely Voice*, O'Connor proposes three central concepts for the short story—"the lonely voice", "the submerged population group", and "the outsider"—which he then elaborates in close readings of individual authors in the chapters that follow. With the "lonely voice", O'Connor highlights the short story's embeddedness in, and difference from, an oral tradition: in the best stories we hear the voice of the individual writer who presses a story—and a message—on the individual reader. This idea favours well-crafted, realist stories over the work of "skilful stylists" who "so fashioned the short story that it no longer ran with the voice of man speaking" (O'Connor 2004, 29). Moreover, the interaction between solitary writer and solitary reader is embedded within their shared belonging to what O'Connor calls "a submerged population

group” (2004, 17). This oft-quoted term is first introduced to explain the prevalence of the short story among ex-centric societies or ethnic groups, who lack “the classical concept of a stable society” required by the novel (2004, 20). Yet, O’Connor then shifts its meaning to define what he considers the essence of the short story, its focus on the experience of the outsider:

Always in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society superimposed sometimes on symbolic figures whom they caricature and echo—Christ, Socrates, Moses [...] As a result there is in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not often find in the novel—an intense awareness of human loneliness. (2004, 18–19)

This emphasis on “loneliness” as “the one subject a storyteller must write about” thus merges with that of the submerged population group and with the title metaphor of the lonely voice into a compelling image of the short story as a realist form predicated on a romantic anti-hero, “remote from the community” and “always dreaming of escape” (2004, 109, 20, 18).

The idea that the short story most typically expresses the fate of the lonely outsider has been echoed by many subsequent critics of the short story, both to distinguish the short story from the novel and to explain the genre’s flourishing among marginalized groups, whether in terms of nationality, ethnicity or gender (Shaw 1983; May 1984; Harris 1994). As Clare Hanson puts it, quoting O’Connor:

Is it not the case that the short story is or has been notably a form of the margins, a form which is in some sense ex-centric, not part of official or ‘high’ cultural hegemony? [...] The short story has offered itself to losers and loners, exiles, women, blacks—writers who for one reason or another have not been part of the ruling narrative or epistemological/experiential framework of their society. (1989, 2)

In Irish literary criticism, as we have seen, O’Connor’s ideas have mostly been used to explain the success of the Irish short story in terms of the marginalized perspective of the Irish as a submerged population group and to normatively define this “national genre” as a realist form with oral roots, expressing an individual’s loneliness and alienation from society. In her critical history of the Irish short story, for instance, Deborah Averill traces in the short fiction of writers from Moore to O’Connor

what she considers “one of the broadest and most pervasive themes in the Irish short story [...] the conflict between the individual and the community”, arguing, “Most Irish writers regarded their society as peculiar, self-defeating and out-of-step with other Western societies, and they could not achieve the stable, universalised view of human life that the novel demands” (1982, 24). David Norris similarly considers the individual’s imaginative revolt against the authority structures of Church, State and Society as the theme “common to all significant writers” of the Irish short story (1979, 39–40) and James Kilroy argues, “Among the subjects treated in almost every short story is the individual’s relationship to society”—a relationship which is mostly one of alienation, disillusionment and despair (1984, 6).

Although Hanson draws on O’Connor’s terms to explain what she sees as a specific relation between women writers and the short story form, O’Connor’s arguments themselves reveal a male bias. His images of the short story writer (“the lonely voice of a man speaking”), protagonist (a Christ-like outsider, at odds with his community) and topic (loneliness and alienation) immediately call up men rather than women. Small wonder then that the two women writers he discusses in *The Lonely Voice*, Mary Lavin and Katherine Mansfield, fall short of the ideal he describes. Mary Lavin’s stories he considers un-Irish in their lack of political content and their focus on domestic issues. He discovers an “almost Victorian attitude to love and marriage” and a “different set of values” which, he argues, “make her more of a novelist in her stories than O’Flaherty, O’Faoláin, or Joyce” (2004, 209, 211). Katherine Mansfield too is considered “something unusual in the history of the short story” and not in a positive sense: unlike “the stories by real storytellers”, her stories do not “leave a deep impression”: “I read and forget, read and forget” (2004, 125). O’Connor’s uneasy bafflement, in the case of Mary Lavin, and outright disapproval, in the case of Katherine Mansfield, reveal the male bias that underlies his ideal of the short story as a genre predicated on the experience of the lonely outsider, at odds with society and longing to escape. Inevitably, Lavin’s explorations of family relations in small Irish towns or Mansfield’s dissection of love, relationships and feminine subjectivity are at odds with this ideal. The same can be said of Somerville and Ross’s humorous depiction of local traditions and events in an Anglo-Irish community, Val Mulhern’s tracing of a tragic family history in her story sequence, *Antiquities*, and Maeve Brennan’s moving depictions of disintegrating marriages in *The Rose Garden*. While the neglect of these and



many other women Irish writers in histories of the Irish short story is of course part of a larger marginalization of women's voices in literary history, it is certainly also due to the continued and unquestioned currency of O'Connor's narrow and essentialist definitions within Irish short story criticism.

### BEYOND THE LONELY VOICE

With the renewed academic interest in Irish short fiction in recent years, there are signs that this hegemonic and normative view of the Irish short story is slowly being eroded. In her highly informative *A History of the Irish Short Story*, Heather Ingman questions "the traditional affiliation of the Irish short story with the mimetic fiction of writers like Frank O'Connor and Séan O'Faoláin" and highlights a central strand in Irish short fiction concerned with "playfulness and subversion", with "experimentation and modernity". She continues: "A longer historical overview allows us to assess the extent to which the form's alliance with realism may be limited to a certain historical moment and reminds us that while realism in the short story might seem the norm, it is not the only mode in which the Irish short story operates" (2009, 12). Similarly, the Irish short story's association with questions of nationhood and national identity—as an expression of the different perspective of the Irish "submerged population group"—has been criticized by Patrick Lonergan, who argues instead for a recognition of three important strands in Irish short fiction: a regional, a national and a cosmopolitan strand:

The development of Irish short fiction [in the period 1880–1921] could be considered from three interlinking perspectives. The works of Somerville and Ross and others can be seen as 'regional': insofar as they address a metropolitan audience and locate Ireland as a marginal but essential element of the United Kingdom. A second mode of writing evident at this time might be described as 'nativist' or nationalist—writings addressed directly towards Irish audiences, which attempt to promote the notion that the country is not only worthy of political independence but also deserving of its own distinctly 'national' literature. Finally, there is also a 'cosmopolitan' mode of short fiction; that is, works by Irish writers who see the subject of their literature as transcending national boundaries, while also crossing the boundaries of realism into the fantastic and the mythological. A similar three-part perspective could also be used to chart the development of Irish writing from Independence to the end of World War II. (2008, 63)

By countering, respectively, the realist and nationalist bias of the standard conception of the Irish short story, Ingman and Lonergan usefully open up the tradition of the Irish short story to a wider variety of authors, texts and perspectives. In this study, I intend to follow their lead by tackling the third—and last remaining—pillar of O'Connor's influential short story ideal: his equation of the short story with loneliness and the outsider. For, as I hope to show, the short fiction of Irish women writers is abundantly concerned with questions of relationality and connection. In the different chapters of this study, I will investigate the way their short stories imaginatively dissect their characters' relations to lovers and friends, fathers and mothers, siblings and children, community members and society at large. Although the relations depicted may be dysfunctional, destructive or simply less than ideal, the short stories' primary interest, I will argue, lies in dramatizing the difficulty of interpersonal relations or the need for human connection rather than in idealizing the romantic outsider or promoting a sense of universal loneliness. In her Introduction to *The Granta Book of the Irish Short Story*, Anne Enright also questions O'Connor's central tenet—"Are all short stories, Russian, French, American and Irish, in fact about loneliness?"—and suggests instead that "Connection, and the lack of it are one of the great themes of the short story" (2010, xv). This is the theme I propose to investigate in the short fiction of Irish women writers. My aim in this is twofold: I intend to reinstate their work within the tradition of the Irish short story, giving it the attention it deserves, and to further corrode the normative view of the Irish short story in terms of realism, nationhood and the outsider.

To a certain extent, these ambitions work in tandem: paying more attention to the work of women writers will help to unsettle and expand the tradition and ideal of the Irish short story which have largely been based on the work of male writers, while abandoning O'Connor's normative ideal of the Irish short story will inevitably make room for writers whose work was considered odd, un-Irish or "novelistic" because it dealt with questions of love and the domestic, the family and the community. However, as the history of feminist criticism has shown, the process is certainly not an automatic one. Rather, a sustained critical scrutiny of women's literature has to go hand in hand with an explicit challenge of reigning norms in order to successfully open up the existing canons and paradigms of Irish literary history. The need for an in-depth critical study of the work of women writers as a first step in the process of changing canons and histories also explains my exclusive focus on

the work of Irish women writers in this study. I am well aware that this choice may invite charges of essentialism, whether of genre or gender, so I will take some time to further delineate the terms of my title—women writers, the short story, Irish literature—and to explain the relations between them.

### GENDER AND GENRE

In her contribution to *Re-reading the Short Story*, Mary Eagleton addresses the vexed question of the relation between gender and genre. Having surveyed different, unsatisfactory responses, she ends her essay with open questions:

What is the relationship of gender to writing? [...] Does the relationship differ with different literary forms and is there, therefore, a particular scope in relating gender to the short story? Can we create a criticism which is non-essentialist, non-reductive but subtly alive to the links between gender and genre? (Eagleton 1989, 66)

Difficult questions indeed. Starting from the observation that a proportionally large number of women writers have turned to the short story—and even devoted their entire œuvre to the form—critics have attempted to explain this conjunction in different ways. Clare Hanson, as we have seen, draws on O'Connor to suggest that “the short story has been from its inception a particularly appropriate vehicle for the expression of the ex-centric alienated vision of women” (1989, 3) and Kate Krueger argues similarly, “Due to its qualities of symbolic suggestiveness, intensity, and rejection of novelistic premises and structures, the short story provides women a venue in which to represent their alienation from dominant ideologies of femininity” (2014, 3–4). While these arguments risk essentializing gender and genre, other critics have construed the connection in terms of a shared marginal position in reigning hierarchies: as the marginalized ‘other’ in the literary system and patriarchal society at large, women writers may well have been drawn to the equally marginal genre of the short story, often conceived of as the novel’s “little brother” (Harrington 2008, 4). Female authors themselves have often raised even more pragmatic reasons for their preference for the short story: it demands a less sustained amount of time and can more easily be accommodated to pressing domestic and child-raising duties.

However, this certainly does not hold for all female authors, nor do any of these explanations give sufficient ground for assuming a necessary, or even privileged, relation between women and the genre of the short story. Hence, I hesitate to agree with Hanson's claim that women writers' use of the form is significantly different from that of male writers or that there is a commonality to all short stories by women writers in the sense of a "squint vision" or alienated perspective (Hanson 1989, 5). The most one can say is that the themes and perspectives offered in women's short fiction tend to reflect their specific position in society and the different experiences that come with that position. In her Introduction to *The Secret Self: A Century of Short Fiction by Women*, Hermione Lee writes, "There is no value in suggesting that women writers are better suited to the short story form than men. But there is value in identifying some of the particular qualities of women's stories" (1995, x). I agree, but with the caveat that identifying recurring concerns or particular perspectives in short stories does not equal absolutizing these concerns or making them normative for women's short fiction as a whole.

With regard to the specific concerns of this study, therefore, I do not want to argue that all women's short stories are about interpersonal relations, and even less that while men write about loneliness, women are interested in connection. Instead, I want to highlight and explain the different ways in which interpersonal relations have been staged, imagined, criticized and questioned in the short fiction of Irish women writers because this concern—like women's short fiction in general—has remained under the radar in Irish criticism. I suspect, in fact, that the stories by male writers too are preoccupied with human connection to a greater degree than the prioritizing of loneliness by O'Connor and many subsequent critics has given credit for. To some extent, the distinction is but a difference in emphasis, a different way of looking at the same fictional reality. O'Connor himself wrote in *The Lonely Voice*, in the context of his reading of Gogol's "Overcoat", "If one wanted an alternative title for this work, one might choose 'I Am Your Brother'" (2004, 16). Think of how differently the Irish short story might have been conceptualized had O'Connor chosen the latter over "The Lonely Voice"!

Apart from my intention to recover the short fiction of Irish women writers and to trace recurring concerns, this exclusive focus on women writers will also enable me to identify the relations of influence and inheritance among these writers. As their letters and reviews show, women writers did read, applaud or reject the short stories of their female predecessors

and contemporaries. Yet, given the male-dominated hierarchies of literary criticism, their work has often been judged only in relation to the male masters of the form. Nevertheless, as I hope to show, it will be most instructive to trace the echoes of Elizabeth Bowen's "Breakfast" in Mary Lavin's "Miss Holland" or to chart the evolving conceptualization of mother-daughter relationships from Edna O'Brien to Claire Keegan. That said, I do not want to set up the short fiction of Irish women writers as a separate tradition next to the dominant, male one. Instead, these female lines of influence will be shown to exist side-by-side with, for instance, Ní Dhuibhne's references to Joyce, Keegan's tribute to McGahern, or Lavin's appropriation of Turgenev. This Russian master of the short story also brings me to another thorny issue which has to be briefly clarified: the relation between genre and nationality.

### THE IRISH SHORT STORY

In his Preface to *New Irish Short Stories*, editor Joseph O'Connor justifies his inclusion of short stories by Richard Ford and Rebecca Miller by noting "I have not been overly focused on passport requirements" since "Literature opens citizenships of affection" (2011, x–xi). Without perhaps going as far as adopting Richard Ford as an Irish short story writer because of "his professorship at Trinity College Dublin", the women writers discussed in this study are 'Irish' in a broad sense. They include Mary Lavin, who was born in Chicago but moved to Ireland as a teenager, as well as Maeve Brennan who permanently moved to the USA at the age of 17. They also include Anglo-Irish Ascendancy writers such as Jane Barlow, Elizabeth Bowen, Edith Somerville and Martin Ross, whom some critics have considered too English to warrant inclusion. In fact, my survey starts with the pioneering short story writer George Egerton, aka Mary Chavelita Dunne, who was born in Australia to an Irish father, spent her youth in Ireland but relocated to England later in life, and it ends with the contemporary writer Claire-Louise Bennett, who went in the opposite direction: born in England, she moved to Galway in the late 1990s.

As with the question of gender, these writers can usefully be grouped together because their life in, or connection to, Ireland grants their work certain shared concerns and perspectives, different from that of other Anglophone writers. Nevertheless, as with the work of women writers, we should beware of essentializing the Irish short story and of seeing it as a tradition entirely separate from that of neighbouring traditions.

In fact, even more than the novel, the short story is as an international genre which easily transcends national and linguistic borders, as its very shortness enables quick magazine publication and encourages rapid translation and dissemination (Turton 2002). Moreover, the modern short story only developed in Britain and Ireland under the influence of French and Russian masters of the form, such as Maupassant, Balzac, Turgenev and Chekhov. This was also something O'Connor recognized when he devoted several chapters of *The Lonely Voice* to the work of American, Russian and English writers. In another way, the short fiction of Irish writers was also affected by its being published by London publishers or in leading American magazines, such as *The New Yorker* or *The Atlantic Monthly*. In short, investigating the Irish short story requires a perspective that is attuned to local topics as well as universal themes, to Irish traditions as well as international trends and influences.

In its focus on more general questions of human connection and community, my study thus differs from existing histories of the Irish short story, which have traditionally assumed a very close link between the Irish short story and questions of nationhood or national identity. This blending of genre and nationality may be due to the perceived special status of the short story in Ireland as a “national genre” or to the fact that the heydays of the Irish short story happened to coincide with the shaping of a distinctive national identity in post-Independence Ireland (Lonergan 2008, 63). Whatever the case, this correlation pervades histories and anthologies of the Irish short story to this day (Ingman 2009, 13). Although I do not want to dispute the validity of such an approach, it is not one I will follow in this study. In my readings, rather, I aim to show how the local and the global go hand in hand in the short stories of Irish women writers, how their investment in the domestic, the parochial, and the regional acquires a far larger human appeal.

### BREVITY AND THE SHORT STORY

The last vexed question to tackle in this Introduction is one all studies of the short story have to deal with: What is the short story? Or even, What is it that makes a story short? Ever since Edgar Allen Poe sought to distinguish the effects and characteristics of short tales from those of longer novels, this question has haunted writers and critics of the short story. Poe himself argued that the short story distinguishes itself by “a certain unique or single effect”, so that “in the whole composition there should be no word written,

of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design” (1994, 61). For much of the twentieth century, the definitions that were given tended to be essentialist: from Brander Matthew’s prescription 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” (1994, 73) to Charles May’s grand claim that “whereas the novel exists to reaffirm the world of ‘everyday’ reality; the short story exists to ‘defamiliarize’ the everyday” (1984, 329). Under the influence of genre theory, these prescriptive approaches gradually gave way to more descriptive and pragmatic attempts to outline Wittgensteinian ‘family resemblances’ among short stories (Friedman 1989; Wright 1989). Moreover, short story theory has recently teamed up with other critical approaches, such as materialist criticism and book studies (Chan 2007; Baldwin 2013), reader-response theories (Gerlach 1985; Lohafer 2003), and stylistics (Toolan 2009). While many of these approaches are highly interesting—and I will draw on some of their insights in what follows—they have not brought us any closer to an exhaustive definition of the genre. As Valerie Shaw notes, “It seems reasonable to say that a firm definition of the genre is impossible. No single theory can encompass the multifarious nature of a genre in which the only constant feature seems to be the achievement of a narrative purpose in a comparatively short space” (1983, 21).

The best we can do, therefore, is to list a number of characteristics which are shared by a significant number of short stories, but are neither totally exclusive, nor absolutely essential to the form. As Austin Wright puts it:

If a genre is a cluster of characteristics [...] borderline and original works can be handled easily and naturally. We can speak of ways in which a work partakes of the short story and ways in which it does not, and the discrimination will enhance a fine description of what the work actually does. (1989, 48)

In the case of the short story, moreover, many of these generic characteristics can be related, in one way or another, to the distinctive brevity of the form. Indeed, even though this brevity cannot be defined in absolute terms, it can be seen to impact the preferred plot structures, characterization, style, narrative techniques, and publication contexts of this narrative form. In terms of plot, first, the short story typically favours plots of smaller magnitude, focused, for instance, on a single incident, disclosure or moment of change, or on a series of incidents or scenes tied together

by a common concern. More than other genres, therefore, the short story depends on a strong degree of focus and unity to carry the reader from the opening lines to the ending. As Gerlach argues, in short fiction, “the anticipation of the ending [is] used to structure the whole” (1985, 3). Still, this end-directedness does not necessarily entail that all stories achieve closure, whether in terms of plot resolution or an O. Henry-like twist. An open ending characterizes many modern stories, as does a beginning *in medias res*. Unsurprisingly, therefore, characterization in short fiction is likely to be less elaborate than in the novel, and to proceed through implication rather than through extensive description, scene-setting or contextualization. This stylistic mode of implication and suggestion has often been considered a hallmark of the modern short story in general. Wright argues,

The shorter the work, the more prominent the details. Words and images, as well as characters and events, stand out more vividly than they would in a larger context. This attention to the parts, found in all short fiction and poetry, implies recalcitrance in the act of attention, the arresting of notice at every significant point. (1989, 120)

This linguistic economy, which the short story arguably shares with poetry, can perhaps most famously be found in the uses of epiphany, ellipsis and symbolism in modernist short fiction. Yet, in more incident-packed short stories too, small details will often prove significant for the denouement of the plot.

Another corollary of the short story’s brevity is its flexibility as a genre. As we will see in the following pages, a short story can take on many different guises. It can be a psychological sketch or fragment, as in some of Egerton’s stories, but also a highly plotted comic tale as in Somerville and Ross’s R.M. stories. It can take the form of a (one-sided) dialogue, an overheard conversation or a fleeting memory, as in Bowen’s stories, but can also condense the story of a life as in O’Brien’s well-known story, “A Rose at the Heart of New York”. Drawing on earlier tale traditions, the story can also be a parable, a fairy-tale revisited, or an overheard tall tale, while cross-overs with other genres can generate short stories in the form of essayistic reflections and dramatic monologues, as in some of Ní Dhuibhne’s stories, but also prose poems, letters or diary fragments as in Donoghue’s story collections. Historically speaking, this flexibility has often put the short story at the forefront of avant-garde movements and waves of experimentation. Thus, Bowen’s modernist stories as well as Enright’s postmodernist