Origins: From Folktale to Art-Tale

The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the earliest recorded reference to the term 'short story' to 1877. Anthony Trollope, in his *Autobiography* (1883), mentions writing 'certain short stories' but, as he suggests elsewhere ('It was a short story, about one volume in length'), he is referring to prose fictions that are simply shorter than his usual narratives (Trollope 1950: 136, 160). Wilkie Collins, likewise, referred to his shorter fiction as 'little novels'. In the United States, despite their apparent advance upon the British, the term only gained currency during the 1880s. Nevertheless, as Raymond Williams indicates in his book *Keywords* (1976), the coinage of a word or phrase implies the need to represent in language a cultural change, a shift in consciousness or society. The neologism of the 'short story' signifies a redefinition of literature towards the end of the nineteenth century; how it is produced, received and consumed. Consequently, the making of the short story acts as an index to the invention of modern fiction and its relationship to changing social, economic and cultural contexts.

Yet, writers did not immediately embrace this new term. British writers, such as Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling and Robert Louis Stevenson, adhered to the older designation of the tale, while E. M. Forster referred to his short stories as fables. Joseph Conrad made no clear distinction between his longer and shorter fictions – to him they were all 'stories' (Fraser 1996: 25). Contrary to popular critical belief, American writers were not any more helpful. Henry James rejected the distinction of novel and short story, preferring instead the non–equivalent French terms of *nouvelle* and *conte*. Mark Twain's satires and tall tales also fail to fit the dictates of the modern short story as prescribed by pioneering critics such as Brander Matthews. Yet, as the title of Matthews' *The Philosophy of the Short-Story* (1901) indicates, even he was uncertain as to how this new form should be

spelt. During the last years of the nineteenth century, there was much debate and confusion surrounding the nature of the short story (see Barr et al. 1897).

For many writers of the period, 'tale' and 'story' were used interchangeably, and no clear distinctions were made except by the editors of periodicals that encouraged, and thrived upon, the late nineteenth-century boom in short stories. Even though the term 'short story' implies a plotted narrative, written as opposed to recited, writers tended to regard themselves as producing the modern-day equivalent of the folktale. H. G. Wells, in particular, took delight in the variety and elasticity of the form: 'Insistence upon rigid forms and austere unities seems to me the instinctive reaction of the sterile against the fecund' (Wells 1914: vii). In other words, to understand the artistic appeal of the short story, it is important to trace, first of all, the prehistory of the form, for that was the tradition in which many early short storywriters felt they were working.

The tale can be traced back to the earliest surviving narrative, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, written in the third millennium BCE. In the following overview, five sub-genres of tale will be considered: parable and fable, the Creation myth, novella, fairy tale and art-tale. The most notable aspect is that, despite its printed versions, the tale is a *spoken* form that, consequently, implies a speaker and a listener. The context for the tale, however, may vary widely, from a parent talking to a child to a religious speaker instructing a congregation to a teacher addressing a class to a storyteller performing to an audience to friends swapping stories. Not only is the tale oral, it is *context-sensitive* to a degree that reading is not. The context will affect the type of tale, its purpose, delivery and reception, nuances of style and presentation that are omitted from a printed account. Furthermore, there is an intimacy of address, which is lost within printed literature. I may never meet the author of the novel I am currently reading; in fact, meeting a favourite author can be a slightly eerie experience. Reading in the era of mass-production is a more alienated activity. I can describe to friends the novel I'm reading but I am unlikely to retell it (the survival of Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* as an oral piece, in the context of Soviet oppression, is a rare exception). But the tale rests upon the physical encounter of speaker and listener, in which the presence of the listener shapes the tale being told. The listener participates in a

tale to an extent that a reader does not. Not only is the tale mutable, changing from context to context, but the positions of speaker and listener are also variable. A listener can become a speaker by choosing to relate the tale: the authority for tale-telling is itself transferable from one participant to another. In this way, the wisdom contained within tales is passed on from one generation to the next. Yet, in different historical circumstances, a storyteller who performs a well-known tale badly or gives offence could, at the very least, be attacked or criticised or, worse, be imprisoned or executed. Both instances are extreme forms of audience participation that re-emphasise the importance of the *co-text*: the manner and technique with which the tale is presented. The recitation of Ares and Aphrodite from Book Eight of Homer's *Odyssey* is a revealing example of how a tale might have been told in the classical period. The gods within the tale act as a kind of stage audience; their amusement parallels the pleasure that the storyteller gives his listeners. Within the unspoken pact of speaker and listener, the tale is an open-ended or *dialogic* form.

Parable and Fable

Parable and fable are closely related forms. The former is a type of storytelling that operates by analogy. While the narrative may be fictional, its aim is to instruct the reader according to a higher religious or moral purpose. Fable is similar, but its chief differences are the endowment of animals and other natural elements with human qualities, a generalised sense of setting or place, and the use of irony. Aesop's *Fables*, for example, rely upon stock characters, such as the ass, the lion and the fox, and despite occasional reference-points, the location is non-specific. This lack of detail allows, instead, for an ironic humour that complements the violence of the fables. So, in one tale after the ass has divided the kill 'into three equal parts', the lion is 'enraged' and eats him. The fox, quite sensibly, then divides the spoils, leaving only the smallest amount for himself, adding 'I learned this technique from the ass's misfortune.' While the appended moral claims that 'we learn from the misfortune of others' (Aesop 1998: 157), the fox's grim joke loads all the meaning of the fable in the final line. The grimness of the humour often unsettles a consistent or overarching morality, so that in another tale, after the fox has ensured the ass'

capture to save himself, he is eaten by the lion which saves 'the ass for later' (Aesop 1998: 201). Aesop's characterisation is simple but not reductive. In some contexts, it is better to be a fox; in others a lion (or even a mouse). The ass, though, is the eternal victim.

In other words, whereas Christian parables such as the Good Samaritan have a clear and instructive meaning, Aesop's *Fables* are more ambiguous, especially the shorter fables that are scarcely more than epigrams. Consequently, while short stories such as Franz Kafka's 'Before the Law' (1914) appear to have a parabolic structure, in that they seem to portend some deeper meaning, the narrative form is closer to that of the fable. The stories of Bertolt Brecht, written in exile from Nazi Germany, can for instance be read as political fables. Brecht's locations, although real, are merely sketched-in; his characters are often anonymous figures, while the precise meaning is unclear. Like his nineteenth-century predecessor, J. P. Hebel, Brecht wants his readers to think but he does not instruct them on *what* to think. Similarly, the apocalyptic ending to Flannery O'Connor's 'Revelation' (1964), a parabolic story laced with irony, calls into question the insight of its central character.

The Creation Myth

Creation myths occur throughout the world from the Norse sagas to Native American tales to Ancient Egypt, Judeo–Christianity and Greco–Roman culture. The Creation myth is a type of parable, but although conceived within a religious framework that considers the events to be fundamentally true, the myth describes not only in terms of moral order how the world came to be. Creation myths are the cornerstone of a culture's cosmology, of how it regards itself in relation to the universe. They describe humanity's perennial concern with origins: the search for identity.

In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Creation myth is presented as a tale within a tale, which is told to the eponymous hero by Utnapishtim, the immortal survivor of the divine Flood that reshaped the world. Gilgamesh has pursued Utnapishtim into the underworld in search of everlasting life following the death of his soul-mate, Enkidu. In other words, the tale that Utnapishtim recalls is connected to Gilgamesh's own quest for self-knowledge. The senseless actions of Enlil, the

warrior god who summoned the Flood, prefigure the foolish hopes of Gilgamesh to secure immortality. While Utnapishtim's tale records how the present world came into existence, it also comments upon mankind's need to accept the inevitability of death. Gilgamesh, like his audience, only realises the wisdom of the myth once his search has ended in failure. It is the encounter though between Utnapishtim and Gilgamesh, set within the literal shadow of death, that contributes to the myth's extraordinary power.

In contrast, the Flood narrative recorded in the *King James Bible* is written with confidence and authority. It bears witness by emphasising details, times, names and places. The writing is inscribed with the narrative's oral use: its delivery from a pulpit by a single speaker. By way of a further contrast, the Flood narrative from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* struggles with his stated aim of spinning 'a thread from the world's beginning/down to my own lifetime, in one continuous poem' (Ovid 2004: 5). If, in one sense, Ovid's text is an attempt to justify the Roman Empire by locating its origins within the divine actions of gods, then the text also has to negotiate the misdeeds recorded by the myths themselves. Jupiter demands for the world to be destroyed due to the evil of men. The other gods are dismayed but Jupiter quells their protest by promising to create an improved human species (which he singularly fails to do). Unlike the biblical God, Jupiter opts for a flood as an afterthought. The ensuing description of devastation is rich and evocative: it functions not as a parable but as drama. Although Jupiter subsequently blesses the lucky survivors, Deucalion and Pyrrha, it is they who have to create a new human race through one of the poem's many transformations. Ovid's final comment, 'And so our race is a hard one; we work by the sweat of our brow/and bear the unmistakable marks of our stony origin' (Ovid 2004: 25), imposes a moral shape upon a set of spoken legends that are altogether more unruly. In this sense, the Roman Creation myth acts more as a portrait of human, rather than divine, society and less as a piece of religious instruction.

Novella

In its modern usage, the term 'novella' refers to a short novel, which in the nineteenth century was called a 'novelette'. Up until the end of the fourteenth century though, 'a novella was a story that could be

true or fictional, new or simply unusual, written or recited' (Clements and Gibaldi 1977: 5). The tale collections of the Middle Ages, such as Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1349–50) and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387), harness these contrasting definitions. Their form, though, was indebted equally to Roman texts, such as Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* (written during the second century CE), and Eastern collections such as the *Panchatantra*, written in Sanskrit sometime in the fifth century CE, and circulating in various translations at the time of Boccaccio. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* offers an even earlier model for the novella through its use of interpolated tales, such as Pan and Syrinx (Book One), and the tales told to one another by the daughters of Minyas (Book Four). *Metamorphoses* is travestied by *The Golden Ass*, a rambling narrative that tells the story of Lucius, a naïve student of folklore, who is transformed into a donkey. Lucius' plight, passed on from one master to the next, allows for a miscellany of tales to be strung together, such as the story of Cupid and Psyche which may have been derived from a Hittite text of the second millennium BCE (Anderson 2000: 63–9). The novelty of the tale lies not in its newness but in its strangeness, a description that can also be applied to the narrative's framing device and point of view, in which readers see the Greco-Roman world from the estranged perspective of Lucius. Apuleius' use of scatological comedy is mirrored by Petronius' *Satyricon* (written in the first century CE), which features a series of bawdy and sensational tales told by a group of party guests.

Boccaccio uses a similar strategy in *The Decameron*. Ten Florentines escape the plague-ridden city to the countryside. Over ten days they each tell ten tales: the purpose is to distract themselves and, in effect, their readers from the horrors of the Black Death. The tales are not original; they all hark from earlier sources such as Books Eight and Nine of *The Golden Ass*. Nevertheless, Boccaccio revolutionised European literature by mixing serious and comic modes, such as the court romance and the *fabliau*, while also parodying pre-existing forms, such as the saint's legend and the *exemplum*. At the same time as drawing his readers' attention to certain kinds of writing, Boccaccio brought a new sensitivity to the use of everyday speech: his characters' vernacular is clearly delineated, a success also achieved by Chaucer in his use, for example, of regional accents. The use made of the novella by both Boccaccio and Chaucer is, at once, self-consciously literary

(Chaucer's insertion of himself into his tales) and embedded within the oral tradition: the reciprocation between tales, for example those told by the Miller and the Reeve or in Boccaccio and Chaucer's rewriting of the same tale in Petrarch as the source of Patient Griselda.

Fairy Tale

The popularisation of the framed narrative by Boccaccio and Chaucer influenced collectors of folktales such as Giovan Francesco Straparola and Giambattista Basile. (The influence of *The Thousand and One Nights* upon Western literature did not occur until Antoine Galland's translation between 1704 and 1717.) Straparola's *The Delectable Nights* (1550–3) has a similar structure to the *Decameron*. Thirteen ladies and gentlemen flee political persecution to the island of Murano near Venice. Over thirteen days they tell each other seventy-five stories, fourteen of which are tales of wonder, including the earliest literary version of 'Puss-in-Boots'. Though the tales are either European or oriental in origin, Straparola rewrote them within the Italian vernacular and framed them so as to capture the readers' attention. Riddles were also added to the end of each tale rather than a didactic message. Although the tales may feature moral observations, they do not function as parables. Wit, low comedy, tragedy and sexual frankness exist alongside one another.

Basile's *Il Pentamerone* or 'The Tale of Tales' (1634–6) features a miscellany of recognisable fairy tales such as 'Cinderella', 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'Rapunzel'. During the course of civil service both in Italy and overseas, Basile overheard and recorded folktales from his servants and other members of the lower orders. Later, he elaborated these tales in a baroque literary style that made use of the Neapolitan dialect. Basile wrote for an aristocratic audience, so while he drew upon folk culture, he combined these references with a parody of elite culture, including canonical texts such as the *Decameron*. The structure of *Il Pentamerone* consists of fifty tales, including the frame-story that opens and closes the collection, related by a group of hags summoned by the Princess Zoza. Like Straparola, the tales are comic, violent and sexually explicit, but marked by Basile's own form of rhetorical play.

Although the tales of Basile and Straparola were circulated among an aristocratic readership for their own amusement, the stories were

still linked to their folk roots. Charles Perrault's *Stories and Tales of Times Past* (1697) took pre-existing fairy tales – the term *conte de fée* was popularised in the same year by Mme d'Aulnoy – and rationalised their structure for French aristocratic readers. Perrault's fairy tales are less explicit than his predecessors, the narratives are smoother and more ordered, the magical elements are more logically explained, and the protagonists conform to emerging notions of gender and sexual conduct. Unlike Basile's 'The Cat Cinderilla', Perrault's heroine is passive, pure and generous, even to her stepsisters, an ideal model of grace and beauty for the girls of aristocratic families. With Perrault, the fairy tale enters a growing discourse surrounding modernity and enlightenment, most problematically displayed in 'Blue Beard'. The tale becomes a vehicle for moral and social instruction, a medium through which children are taught how to be civilised. In the process, the fairy tale is gradually removed from its folk origins.

This displacement can be seen most clearly in the work of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. The rise of nationalistic movements in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars encouraged a new interest in folk culture including, in Germany, *Volksmärchen* or the folktale. Between 1812 and 1857, the Grimms assembled tales from oral and printed sources under the collective title of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*Children's and Household Tales*). As the title indicates, these tales were addressed towards the domestic space associated with children and their mothers. Like Perrault, the Grimms streamlined the tales but inculcated the narratives with the austere beliefs of Protestantism. Whereas Perrault's Cinderella is kind-hearted, the Grimms' Ashiepattle avenges herself in the form of the doves that peck out the sisters' eyes. Unlike the playfulness of Basile, the violence of the Grimms is directed towards a didactic message based upon punishment and proscription while sexuality is either repressed or denied. (It is for this reason that psychoanalysis becomes such a useful tool in decoding the hidden meanings within Perrault and the Brothers Grimm. Before then, psychoanalysis adds little to a story such as Straparola's 'Incestuous Designs of a King'.) Instead of Perrault's enlightened modernity, the Grimms use the fairy tale as a means of introducing a strict and regulated social order. In other words, despite the academic interest in folk culture, the fairy tale is slowly appropriated, in this case for the services of the German bourgeoisie.

Art-Tale

The Grimms introduced in the course of their collecting the notion of *Kunstmärchen*, the artistic or literary fairy tale. Hans Christian Andersen is the most famous exponent of this form, either writing original tales such as 'The Steadfast Tin Soldier' (1838) or adapting tales, such as 'The Little Mermaid' (1837), from popular ballads. Andersen's earliest tales are adaptations from traditional folktales, but even these are invested with Andersen's own characteristic style – colloquial language, irony, commonplace references, realism juxtaposed with magic. In tales such as 'The Red Shoes' (1845), the element of transformation allows for spiritual and metaphysical insight: the step into other worlds.

Throughout America and Europe in the nineteenth century, many art-tales were composed. The fairy tale was a popular and accessible form for readers, while its motifs, especially that of magic, allowed writers to comment upon and transform the observable world. Though fairy tales can be read in terms of social comment, art-tales are written with an expressed artistic or political purpose in mind. The art-tales of, for example, Washington Irving ('Rip Van Winkle'), Charles Dickens ('A Christmas Carol'), Nikolai Gogol, J. P. Hebel and Oscar Wilde ('The Happy Prince') introduce a level of self-consciousness absent from the earlier fairy tale collections. Two stories, Gogol's 'The Nose' (1836) and Hebel's 'Unexpected Reunion' (1811), are exemplary of the sub-genre. Gogol's tale is a fantastical piece in which, for unexplained reasons, a self-important official, Kovalyov, loses his nose. The nose, though, reappears dressed in government uniform, and proceeds to lead an active life around St Petersburg. Unable to persuade the nose that it is not an individual person, and unable to rejoin it to his face, Kovalyov's identity begins to disintegrate for 'lacking a nose, a man is devil knows what' (Gogol 2003: 315). In the final section of the story, the nose magically returns to Kovalyov's face, and normality is restored, except that Gogol's narrator struggles to accept the reality of the story he has just told: 'And then, too, are there not incongruities everywhere?' (Gogol 2003: 326).

Hebel's 'Unexpected Reunion', one of the most moving stories in the German language, also presents an unlikely event but, characteristic of its author's style, relates the incident in a realistic and understated

manner: 'When however, before the feast of Saint Lucia, the parson had called out their names in church for the second time, "If any of you know cause, or just hindrance, why these persons should not be joined together in holy Matrimony" – Death paid a call' (Hebel 1995: 25). The bridegroom dies in a mining accident and his body is lost. Years later, the corpse is rediscovered, petrified in ferrous vitriol, so that the body has not decayed. It is the former bride, who has spent the rest of her life in mourning, who identifies the body:

> The hearts of all those there were moved to sadness and tears when they saw the former bride-to-be as an old woman whose beauty and strength had left her; and the groom still in the flower of his youth; and how the flame of young love was rekindled in her breast after fifty years, yet he did not open his mouth to smile, nor his eyes to recognize her. (Hebel 1995: 27)

Through a chance occurrence, bordering upon magic, two separate times are brought into relation with one another. In-between, though, Hebel relates an extraordinary chronicle of miscellaneous events – wars, natural disasters, political upheavals – that proceed without apparent consequence upon the lives of the common folk. Instead, the confusion of history is offset by the turn of the seasons and the rhythmical pattern of agrarian labour. In the story's final paragraph, the groom's miraculous return prefigures the Day of Judgement when the dead will rise again. To quote Walter Benjamin, who elsewhere praises Hebel's story, the conclusion is 'shot through with chips of Messianic time . . . the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter' (Benjamin 1992: 255).

In other words, as the fairy tale was gradually removed from its folk roots to become an instrument within the civilising process of young children, so writers such as Gogol and Hebel found within its resources a medium for social and philosophic thought. The art-tale, then, is an important development since it bridges the gap between the folktale and the modern short story. From this brief survey, it is possible to draw some preliminary conclusions. First, while tales often feature moral messages, they are not innately didactic, though they have subsequently been used for moral purposes. Second, while narrative elements reoccur, tales are mutable: they alter according to their retelling but these changes are not sudden. Tales are slowly transformed over

time and within social contexts. Third, the mutability of tales runs counter to the fixed arrangement of the printed page. The success of Boccaccio was to write in a literary style that highlighted the framing and perspective of narration, while also displaying sensitivity to the spoken voice. Chaucer and Basile recapture a semblance of the oral tradition through their respective use of rhetorical play: the mixing of modes and registers. Fourth, despite the rationalisation of the tale as an instrument of social conduct in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, writers addressing an adult audience realised in the tale a capacity for artistic and social purpose. These observations, in varying degrees, are relevant to the development of the short story. Yet they are prefigured by the ending to *The Epic of Gilgamesh* when the hero, who 'was wise . . . saw mysteries and knew secret things', returns from his epic quest and engraves 'the whole story' onto stone tablets (*Epic of Gilgamesh* 1960: 117), in effect, the cosmology of his people and the story that, as readers, we have just read. Gilgamesh is transformed from the warrior to the storyteller, who explores uncharted territories, converts his experience into art and establishes his authority through the wisdom he has accrued. In effect, Gilgamesh becomes a model of both the storyteller and the pioneering artist, who writes not only themselves but also their relationship to their readers into their art. This deeply self-conscious notion of the artist will also be important to an understanding of the short story.

Further Reading

For a useful sketch of the short story from its ancient origins, see Chapter 2 of Ian Reid's *The Short Story* (1977). On the folktale and the fairy tale, see respectively the influential formalist study by Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folk-Tale* (1968), and the psychoanalytic account by Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976). Jack Zipes has edited an excellent critical anthology, *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition* (2001). Although there is little critical literature on the art-tale, see Kari Lokke, 'The Romantic Fairy Tale', in Michael Ferber's *Companion to European Romanticism* (2005). On the subject of genre, see Jacques Derrida's difficult yet rewarding essay, 'The Law of Genre', in *Acts of Literature* (1992).