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REALISM IN THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SHORT STORY²

Starting from the premise that the short story observes the laws of narrative and the tenets of realism on its own terms, the paper will explore the realism in the work of two prominent American short story writers: Ernest Hemingway and Ann Beattie. Although considered to lack the “breadth”, scope and universality of the novel and also accused of being fragmentary and subjective, short story can use its brevity to claim its nearer kinship to poetry and yet not violate its realistic frame. Declaring the need for compression, the form combines the increased rigor in detail selection and word choice with an emphasis on suggestive language, in order to convey emotion and render judgment with seeming objectivity within the confines of its generically limited space.

Keywords: realism, representation, American short story, Hemingway, Beattie

Realism shows a pragmatic and empirical understanding of life and human behaviour, recognising both human individuality and conscious experience, encouraging the writers to explore unique individual lives and experiences lived in realistic, intersubjective environments. Realism in literature starts as a representation of the consciousness peculiar to an emerging modern world, with a concern for verisimilitude and fidelity to experience. What the traditional realistic novel expands in narrative is that profound epistemological and ontological revolution announced by philosophers such as John Locke, Descartes or Spinoza, who see that reality is grounded in sense perception and quotidian experience (Richetti 1999: 3).

Ever since the rise of realism, the motto “show, don’t tell” has served as a cardinal rule for fiction writers. Such a mimetic emphasis implicitly assumed the existence of a tangible external reality that could be represented, and the expectation that a writer should have no special competence in deciding the moral issues. This transformation in fiction partly accounts for the emergence of the modern short story. As it declared the need for compression, it combined the increased rigor in detail selection and word choice with an emphasis on suggestive language, in order to convey emotion and render judgment with seeming objectivity within the confines of its generically limited space.

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² This paper was written as part of the project number 178002 (Languages and Cultures in Time and Space (Jezici i kulture u vremenu i prostoru)), financially supported by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Serbia.

The subject matter the short story covered also related to the reality in itself:

The short story can be anything the author decides it shall be; it can be anything from the death of a horse to a young girl's first love affair, from the static sketch without plot to the swiftly moving machine of bold action and climax, from the prose poem, painted rather than written, to the piece of straight reportage in which style, colour, and elaboration have no place, from the piece which catches like a cobweb the light subtle iridescence of emotions that can never be really captured to the solid tale in which all emotion, all action, all reaction is measured, fixed, puttied, glazed and finished, like a well-built house, with three coats of shining and enduring paint. In the infinite flexibility, indeed, lies the reason why the short story has never been adequately defined. (Bates 1941: 73-74)

Therefore, the short story can represent emotion, action or reaction, and its flexibility is not infinite in the sense that it could serve as an excursion into the unreal. Although considered to lack the "breadth", scope and universality of the novel and also accused of being fragmentary and subjective, the short story can use its brevity to claim its nearer kinship to poetry and yet not violate its realistic frame. Readers obviously demand subtlety from fiction, but suggestiveness in the modern short story is essential to the form, for the very shortness of the story demands the kind of compression of discourse that lies somewhere between the language of poetry and that of novels. According to Elizabeth Bowen, the short story must be more concentrated, can be more visionary and is not weighed down by fact, explanation or analysis (Lohafer 1983: 12-13). The short story form observes the laws of the narrative on its own terms, never compelled to serve the purpose of detailed analysis or development of character. As Elizabeth Bowen tells us, "the short story allows for what is crazy about humanity: obstinacies, inordinate heroisms, immortal longings" (Ibid).

The difficulty, as Flannery O'Connor sees it, is that in a good short story all that is "essential to the main experience" (O'Connor 1984: 93) must be present. The short story writer, she concludes, has to achieve effects by "showing, not by saying, and by showing the concrete - so that his problem is how to make the concrete work double time for him" (O'Connor 1984: 98). This is done through effective selection of details and the use of suggestive language, both of which lead to compression without loss of meaning. Henry James warned of the immense risks that arise from the difficulty of compression, "for nothing is less intelligible than bad foreshortening, which, if it fails to mean everything intended, means less than nothing" (James 1956: 190).

Suggestiveness, though not peculiar to the short story, is nevertheless peculiarly important. According to Flannery O'Connor, the writer must "realize that he can't create compassion with compassion, or emotion with emotion, or thought with thought" (O'Connor 1984: 92). The reader's senses cannot be engaged by a language that is abstract, too formal and impassionate. O'Connor observes that "the first and most obvious characteristic of fiction is that it deals with reality through what can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted, and touched" (O'Connor 1984: 91).

Although vivid detail is important to all fiction, it is essential to the short story because the story has less space in which to construct its fictional world. In constructing the plot and action of a story, the writer must first decide which are the necessary details to provide “specification” and help establish a story’s fictional world, since superfluous detail blurs the story’s plot and action. Flannery O’Connor warns against “the simple, mechanical piling-up of detail”, advocating that details have to be controlled by some overall purpose: “Art is selective. What is there is essential and creates movement.” (O’ Connor 1984: 93). Therefore, detail for its own sake, no matter how original, vivid and realistic, serves no purpose if it does not serve the story in its entirety. The details selected by the writer must be the ones that will engage the reader’s imagination just as they once engaged the writer’s mind; they are the signifiers through which the writer expresses and tries to evoke emotion.

It seems that we have been accustomed to a particular image of Ernest Hemingway as a short story writer whose terse, hardboiled style imposes strict rules of reticence and emphasizes reliance on indeterminacy. As a rule, he is seen as the ardent follower of Russian storytellers Chekhov and Turgenyev, especially the latter, whose stories and sketches he much admired, along with Sherwood Anderson. Hemingway is rarely seen as a disciplined stylist whose short stories share many characteristics of Imagist poetry, of which he became aware in the 1920s, through his association with modernists like Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein. Influenced by T. S. Eliot’s theory of the objective correlative and Ezra Pound’s ideas about Imagism, sensing the power in the direct treatment of things, Hemingway created a language, both symbolic and journalistic, in which external reality resonates with connotative meaning. His famous prose style consists of plain but powerful words and simple but artfully structured syntax, and it aims at the direct presentation of the object and the use of language which was carefully stripped of any ornaments that could be misleading. The stories “Cat in the Rain” and “Hills Like White Elephants”, to name but a few notable examples, are replete with symbolic language, functioning referentially to describe a plausible event or real object with symbolic implications. Hemingway chooses to achieve small-scale, concentrated effects rather than construct majestic sentences. However, the minimalist language is conjoined with the hero whose undaunted masculinity is larger than life, but who is more a bitter parody of manhood as conceived by traditional images of masculinity than a paragon of socially constructed masculine authority. This becomes more evident when we remember that his short stories actually deal with a world impossible to handle and control, with the fragmentary nature of experience and chaotic structure of modern life, and consequently with the hero who is frail, alienated and confused, following the victories and defeats of a narrow scope and focusing on the present moment in order to keep his sanity.

The prevailing mood of disenchantment, confusion and bitterness seems to go along perfectly with the artistic form of the short story, which requires the focus on the turning point in the character’s life and chooses to dwell on a particular moment of crisis, climax or change. The disappointment of

the hero is carefully camouflaged by telegraphic language, filled with silence and reticence. Hemingway's minimalism interrogates the limits of art by rejecting those customary conventions which turn realism into a system of literary artifice. On the other hand, the short story demonstrates a need for compression and an increased rigor in detail selection and word choice, in order to convey emotion and render judgment with seeming objectivity within the confines of its generically limited space.

Hemingway began his writing career as a newspaper reporter on *The Kansas City Star*, and the precepts he learned on that paper he described as the best rules he ever learned for the business of writing (Lohafer 1983: 75). Some of the 110 rules in the paper's style-sheet required short sentences and short paragraphs, whereas the others demanded elimination of superfluous words, calling for brevity, precision, accuracy and clarity. The same way he transformed journalist style into a literary one, Hemingway transforms fact into fiction: in his later career there were more examples of how he ended up writing a short story instead of a news despatch. While covering the Spanish Civil War for the North American Newspaper Alliance (NANA), Hemingway used his field notes to write dispatches on the one hand and short stories on the other, the most notable example being the story "Old Man at the Bridge".

The very title of Hemingway's first book of stories *In Our Time* suggests the connection between fiction and current events, but at the same time it draws the line between what is reported and what is invented. The volume consists of a series of stories about the childhood and youth of Nick Adams, interspersed with very short vignettes or sketches in fifteen numbered "chapters", mainly dealing with the First World War scenes and bullfights, as well as some other aspects of violence in modern life that called for vivid and expressive language. Hemingway relied on formal devices such as juxtaposition instead of verbosity, as the strategy of juxtaposing stories and sketches helped set a private, individual experience depicted in the stories against glimpses of the largely anonymous life of the public world perceived in the vignettes. What became known as the Hemingway code – honourable behaviour in situations of physical or other danger, fair play, courage and dignity in defeat – was exemplified above all in his short stories, the brevity and intensity of which provided a formal analogy to the brief but intense periods of time in battle or sport. The stories in *In Our Time* present Nick in various temptations of his childhood, adolescence and young manhood, and constitute a kind of fragmentary Bildungsroman, a novel of growing up amid strange occurrences and inconceivable phenomena that are sometimes almost impossible to convey. While Hemingway's debt to Imagism can be perceived in clear, referential language, his debt to journalism is understood when we witness the remarkable force of evoking powerful images rather than describing them. Hemingway did not seem to have any proper predecessors who might teach him minimalism. There are clear parallels here with Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, but the protagonist of the book in his role of a writer is as much an observer with a talent to describe common things in a poetical manner rather than agent. Anderson's George Willard is the central intelligence that does not allow the individual stories to disperse, but rather

gathers them in a unique testimony of human loneliness. Nick Adams is more a reflector than an omniscient narrator, and it is only towards the end of the book, in passing, that Nick Adams is referred to as a writer. While we know of George Willard's life only what the stories of other characters allow us to see, Hemingway's focus is more exclusively on Nick as a representative young American from the country, his conflicts with his parents, his early love affairs, his encounters with the world of experience, failure, death and war, than on his juvenile attempts at writing literature.

The prevailing sense of this collection of stories' underpinning atmosphere of contemplation and futility serves the purpose of asking identical questions the reader of James Joyce's *Dubliners* and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* may ask. Hemingway's chronological series of stories about an American boy growing up against a landscape of idyllic Michigan is not easy to classify, as it alternates fully developed stories with vignettes that provide only brief and shocking glimpses into scenes of chaos, death, disorder and pain. The structure of *In Our Time* encompasses traditional realistic stories, preceded by brief sketches reporting abrupt and violent events such as police shootings and incidents of the war, the main cohesive element between the two distinctive sets of fictional texts being the character of Nick Adams.

Unlike Hemingway, who was seemingly disinterested in the class issues, Ann Beattie focuses upon the New York white upper middle class and the rich people from the East Coast who are immature and insecure regardless of their age. Her characters are marked with failure to reconcile the idealism of their youth with their present lifestyles, which are marked by disappointments and the ensuing listlessness.

Beattie's characters seek refuge from emotional misfortunes in connecting to privileged objects or their pets. All of them are ready to choose the lesser evil, turning their lives into an endless sequence of neurotic hesitation to comply with their own wishes and the hidden reaching out to the world. Ann Beattie is a master at portraying the sorts of relationships—the results of divorce, sexual liberation, or youthful aimlessness—that were becoming the norm for a generation that had come of age in the sixties and seventies. Over the years Beattie's style has shifted to encompass a greater range of narrative voices and descriptive flourishes, but her wry voice, intimate narration, and tart characterization remain instantly recognizable.

Beattie's prose consists of what Virginia Woolf would call a myriad of impressions, of countless unnoticed quotidian earth tremors that change a person's character slowly and steadily, almost unnoticeably. Beattie's characters perceive and conceive all those microchanges in themselves and their surroundings, risking to be misunderstood because they see what others are blind for. Therefore "minimalism" has nothing to do with empty hearts, dull-witted perception and the strategies emotionally crippled people use to distort reality and escape responsibility. Beattie's writing is often accused of being bland, shallow and unengaging, her stories are considered plotless, and themes and situations all too repetitive because the opponents to her style neglect the fact that her manner of writing only mimics the impassivity of

her characters, which have passed from their youthful anomie in the 1970's to the struggling with the middle age in the first decade of the 21st century. In recent years, Beattie has made a great effort to make the transition from her early, widely imitated and parodied style of elliptical narratives free of authorial comment but filled with contemporary details and bright fragments of dialogue, to a more introspective and carefully plotted approach. With her collection of stories *Follies* she invents a newly flexible voice that accommodates both her patented gift for social observation and her more recent interest in her characters' inner lives, a voice that allows her to move fluently back and forth in time, back and forth from memory to rumination.

The theme of random and precarious nature of life has become more prominent in Beattie's recent stories, which seem to depart from minimalism, at least by offering a broader vision of life and death. In them, even the problems of a less spectacular kind can result in devastating consequences. The theme of random, precarious and even brutal nature of life has become more prominent in both the stories and the novels, accidents and unexplained events are present more than before, along with the author's unwillingness to explain or connect them. The best example of the newly acquired plot randomness is offered in "Flechette Follies" and its row of aimless searches and misunderstandings that will never be settled, along with half-finished portraits of two women and one man, strangely connected, lonely and ignorant about their real feelings.

The novella starts off with a car accident that brings together a middle-aged CIA operative and a nurse in an assisted-living facility; she hires him to find her estranged son, which is only the beginning of bizarre events which include the agent's death that will remain unknown to his girlfriend and acquaintances. George Wissone, a secret mission man with a number of aliases, is a special agent who was recruited right out of a summer camp and offered perks of a confidential job such as free college and money in an offshore bank account, together with "a letter of thanks from the president of the United States that consisted mostly of an uppercase warning not to frame it and hang it in public view" (Beattie, 2006: 26).

George travels to London to look for Nancy's son Nicky. There he meets with a friend Max, who introduces him to Cary, a strange young woman who turns out to be the young man's roommate. Knowing Nicky's whereabouts, George goes to the Chinese restaurant he works in to find him, only to be hit by a car in front of the restaurant. George's death remains secret for his girlfriend Paula and his best friend Rich O'Malley, who try to arrange a date with Nancy, hoping that she might help them about George's whereabouts. There are several misconceptions about Nancy: Paula thinks she must be a woman George is hooked up with, whereas Rich suspects some foul play because George would never disappear without leaving a note. The bulk of the novella is about the unsuccessful investigations and misconceptions: Nancy fears her son might be dead, but she never considers the option that he decided to burn all the bridges; Paula guesses that George might have retired to Mustique, or left her for another woman, but it never occurs to her that he might be dead. Thus the apparent richness of the plot accentuates the frailty and ignorance

of characters whose insight and understanding seem to be reduced to a minimum. Instead of questioning her wishes and instincts, Paula trusts her therapist, and her sudden decision to marry the radiologist Kenny is followed by an equally unexpected decision to break up the engagement after meeting his mistrustful daughter. Instead of trying to mend her relationship with her son, a drug addict with serious problems with anger management, Nancy makes a series of clumsy attempts to find him through private investigators. Paula and Nancy are emotionally non-responsive, yet delicate women whose unhappy family histories prevent them from opening up and embracing life to the fullest: Paula's relationship to her father was filled with silence and rejection, whereas Nancy never succeeded in establishing a healthy marriage, expressing her anger by crushing flowers instead of revealing her wishes and aspirations to her husband.

The story "Tending Something" is about a twentysomething New Yorker Mandy, who is throwing a surprise party for her friend Kathy, but all her endeavors go awry: the borrowed crystal vase gets shattered, the birthday girl comes late with a newly acquired fiancée who is considerably tipsy. Mandy remembers her childhood in Virginia, her father and grandfather, her mother's death. Her love affair with McLafferty failed before it started because he has loads of problems: addiction to drugs with impotence as side effect and he has recently lost his job. Mandy is vulnerable but reticent, eager to please but quick to hide behind the screens of conventions. The story "That Last Odd Day in L. A." deals with another elderly character Keller, who separated from his wife and became estranged to his daughter. He lives alone, with no friends and a sporadical girlfriend whose son will shoot him. The wound makes substantial changes in Keller's life, also exposing his soft spots and problematic relationships.

The plots of the recent stories indicate an intense awareness that the family ties cannot alleviate the sense of alienation and loss, and these characters have also lost the privileged objects and fixed rituals the earlier heroes were clinging to. The most striking example of a privileged object turning into a powerful symbol is found in one of Beattie's early stories, "Janus", the story of a bowl which becomes both a lucky charm and a sad reminder for its owner. The real estate agent Andrea got the enticing object from her ex-lover, and she keeps this present only because she did not dare keep the relationship. She never parts with the bowl: it is either on her coffee table, or carefully placed in the houses which she shows to prospective buyers, in order to make them intrigued and trick them into purchasing the estate. Being the symbol of Andrea's hollow and empty but seemingly attractive life, the bowl is also a magic reminiscence she needs to keep on living, and the reminder that meaningful existence is still possible out there. Another example from the story "The Second Question" refers to a more personal object: a pearl necklace. After breaking up with her married lover, a nameless hand model going under the nickname Rac (short for raccoon) starts taking care of a friend who is fighting AIDS. She is on easier terms with his imminent death than with truth of her life: when the pearl necklace of her lover's wife she was wearing broke

during a sexual intercourse, Rac swallowed several pearls so that the necklace would not be the same length when restrung. She wanted to warn her rival of the imminent change: however, the message of “breaking bonds” did not get through, and all we know is that Rac’s relationship failed without changing considerably anybody’s life, not even hers. “The Second Question” and “Janus” demonstrate the importance of visual cues: while the bowl is represented as a Holy Grail of inexplicable yet inarticulate power, the pearl necklace invokes the conflicting images of binding and bonding.

Beattie uses lacunae to provide the sense of profundity, following in the footsteps of Ernest Hemingway’s theory of omission, but she never bases her narrative strategies on simple exclusion, which minimalism is often accused of. With her collection of stories *Follies* as a landmark of that transition she invents a newly flexible voice that accommodates both her patented gift for social observation and her more recent interest in her characters’ inner lives, a voice that allows her to move fluently back and forth in time, back and forth from memory to rumination, although Beattie still rejects the privileges of authorial omniscience.

The cases of Hemingway and Beattie show that the need for compression, joined with rigor in detail selection and proper choice of words, leads to a magnificent fiction which manages to achieve suggestiveness within the confines of its generically limited space. Praised as careful observers of the urban landscape and intimate relationships, the two short story writers expand the boundaries of genre that has always been full of, as one of Beattie’s book titles say, secrets and surprises.

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REALIZAM U SAVREMENOJ AMERIČKOJ KRATKOJ PRIČI**Rezime**

Rad će se pozabaviti parametrima realizma u američkoj kratkoj priči na primeru dvoje autora, Ernesta Hemingveja i En Biti, polazeći od premise da kratka priča zakonitosti pripovedanja i postavke realističke poetike poštuje na sopstveni način, drugačije nego što to čini roman. Premda se za kratku priču smatra da ne poseduje tematsku širinu romana, da je fragmentarna i subjektivna, kratkoća je ipak prednost koja omogućuje da se ova narativna forma smesti u najbliže okruženje poezije i njenih postulata, a da to ipak ne ugrozi njene realističke okvire. Potreba za sažimanjem, strogost u selekciji detalja i izrazita usmerenost na sugestivnost jezika kako bi se posredovala emocija i poruka dela sa makar prividom objektivnosti biće predstavljeni u okvirima poetika dvoje pisaca.

Ključne reči: realizam, predstavljanje, američka kratka priča, Hemingvej, Biti

Primljen 8. septembra, 2015. godine

Prihvaćen 3. oktobra, 2015. godine