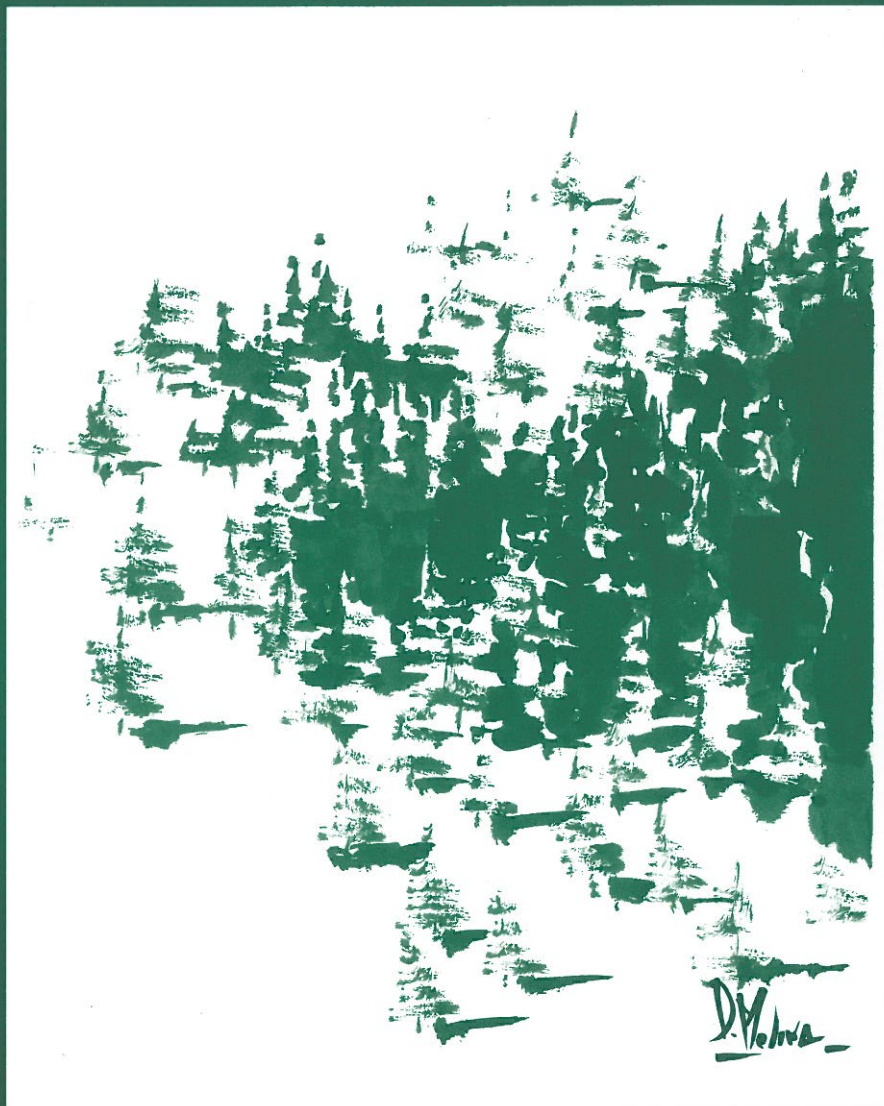


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working papers on english studies

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# The Grove

## Working Papers on English Studies

21

2014



*Research Group HUM. 271 (Andalusian Government)  
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**THE GROVE**  
**WORKING PAPERS ON ENGLISH STUDIES**  
**21**

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**VIORICA PATEA, ED. (2012). *SHORT STORY THEORIES:  
A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY PERSPECTIVE.***

**Amsterdam: Rodopi, ISBN: 978-90-420-3564-5, 346 pp.**

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Almost fifty years have elapsed since Thomas H. Gullason published an article in which he identified the reasons why the short story was considered an underrated literary form. In his view, the number of practitioners discussing the form and the scarcity of critical essays and books on theory resulted in a lack of interest among American readership (Gullason 1964:17). In the Seventies, Charles E. May edited *Short Story Theories*, a groundbreaking volume made up of articles by experts on the genre which have come to mark the starting point of recent short story criticism. As might be expected, May disagreed with Gullason and anticipated that the main problem faced by short fiction was partly due to “a reaction to too much systematic criticism in the first few decades of the twentieth century” (May 1976:5). He blamed critics (e.g. Brander Matthews) and writers (e.g. O. Henry) for taking advantage of the popularity of short fiction among readers. Soon, many critics and hack writers rushed to imitate Matthews and O. Henry to secure popular financial success in what resulted in a banalization of the form, a fact that prompted serious readers and critics to call for an end to it.

The following decades witnessed the publication of critical studies which put the genre under scrutiny: Ian Reid’s *The Short Story* (1977), Susan Lohafer’s *Coming to Terms with the Short Story* (1983), Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey’s *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads* (1989), May’s sequel *The New Short Story Theories* (1994), Farhat Iftekharuddin, Mary Rohrberger and Maurice Lee’s *Speaking of the Short Story* (1997) and, finally, Barbara Lounsberry, Susan Lohafer and Mary Rohberger’s *The Tales We Tell: Perspectives on the Short*

*Story* (1998) are just some of the many books published. The turn of the century also confirmed a renewed interest in short fiction, although a definite deviation with regard to previous studies was noticed. In this sense, Lohafer, one of the leading-voices in the form, stated that recent “discussions of the short story tend now to be genre-bending and interdisciplinary” (1998:xi). As Laura Lojo (2013:195) rightly points out, the essays published in twenty-first century critical volumes<sup>1</sup> seemed to attest to Lohafer’s prophetic words. The most recent trend in scholarly publications have placed an interest in building academic bridges between Spanish and Anglo-American scholars and researchers in the field. Those are the cases of *Contemporary Debates on the Short Story* (2006), edited by José R. Ibáñez, José Francisco Fernández and Carmen M<sup>a</sup> Bretones, and more recently, *Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Short Story in English* (2012), a volume compiled by Jorge Sacido.

The collection of essays edited by Viorica Patea is to date the latest contribution to short fiction criticism and the unmistakable proof that the short story continues to raise a growing interest in the academic community. Patea’s remarkable book is a sixteen-essay volume with contributions by Spanish, Spanish American and American scholars who explore the genre from historical, theoretical and practical perspectives. The book title may well be interpreted as an homage paid to May’s 1976 and 1994 editions to critical studies on short fiction and his academic efforts in the field.<sup>2</sup>

The compilation is divided into four different sections which aim to cover the most diverse types of approaches to short fiction. It opens with Viorica Patea’s introduction that tackles issues concerning the beginnings of the short story, theory of the form, structure and evolution. Patea rightfully points out that the short story is a very ancient literary form, its earliest examples dating back to Biblical times. She acknowledges the importance of Poe – the founding father

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<sup>1</sup> Among such outstanding studies, Fahrat Iftekharuddin et al.’s *Postmodern Approaches to the Short Story* (2003), Charles E. May’s *The Short Story. The Reality of Artifice*, Maurice Lee’s *Writers on Writing. The Art of the Short Story* (2005), Per Winther, Jakob Lothe and Hans H. Skei’s *The Art of Brevity. Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis* (2007) should be cited.

<sup>2</sup> In this sense, nine out of sixteen contributions published in Patea’s anthology have acknowledged, quoted from or articulated their analyses from articles that have appeared in both of May’s volumes.

of the American short story – and the rising interest that the form gained after the period of banalisation at the turn of the twentieth century which rendered disaffection among American readers and critics. In her analysis of the structure of the short story, Patea lingers on the different discussions that have arisen around its nature and its definition as genre, by bearing in mind features such as brevity, fragmentation, intensity and mystery<sup>3</sup>. In addition to this, Patea looks into the evolution of the form beginning with Poe's early conception that made the short story "America's most identifiable homegrown literary genre" (16). Thus, if Poe laid the foundations of the genre, the short story evolved in the hands of Anton Chekhov whose stories were characterized by an impressionistic atmosphere and a "minimal dependence on the traditional notion of plot" (May 1994:201), and was soon echoed by modernist writers (Joyce or Mansfield).

Antonio López Santos's study aims to prove that medieval tales may help us understand the development of the modern short story as he analyses Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as unique narrative pieces not comparable to other medieval practitioners such as Giovanni Boccaccio (*The Decameron*, 1353) or John Gower (*Confessio Amantis*, 1390) (28). In his study, López Santos offers an insightful reading of Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale" and "The Nun's Priest's Tale" from a narratological perspective and concludes by reasoning that these sample tales possess certain features, namely the tree-like structure, that allow multiple interpretations which "seem closer to the modern short story than to the classic tale" (45).

Peter Gillian's "Anticipating Aestheticism: The Dynamics of Reading and Reception in Poe" focuses on the American author's peculiar vision of Aestheticism in "The Oval Portrait" and "The Fall of the House of Usher". Gillian offers a remarkable attempt to explain how Poe's aesthetic vision, characterized as "a form of haunting – a return of something that had been repressed" (50), was welcomed in Europe and eventually transformed with completely new features before its transatlantic return. In this sense, Poe was welcomed in Europe with open arms and became the key figure shaping European Aestheticism –

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<sup>3</sup>Eudora Welty stated that "the first thing we notice about our story is that we can't really see the solid outlines of it – it seems bathed in something of its own. It is wrapped in an atmosphere... [which] may be its chief glory" (1976:163).



in Britain influencing Dante Rossetti, Robert Louis Stevenson, or Oscar Wilde. In France, however, French Aestheticism had developed out of Baudelaire's response to Poe; French "Décadence", on the other hand, emerged "as the exploration of abnormal... the psychopathology of modern life" (69). Thus, when Poe's aestheticism returned to America in the 1890s, the uncanny effect which it produced in American artists was even stranger to the "haunting" effect produced in Poe's contemporaries.

In "Revising Theory: Poe's Legacy in Short Story Criticism", Erik Van Achter broaches a fundamental problem which has long remained unsolved since Poe's day. The short story has always been and "continues to be defined in relation to other genres," primarily the lyric and the novel, and "continues to resist or elude definition" (77). Van Achter contends that short story criticism after Poe is sterile. Thus, what became a stack of notes which were not intended to become a poetics of the new genre had held sway for over more than a century. Van Achter determines the existence of two main waves of short story theories during the twentieth century: the first one, which hardly moved away from Poe's framework, sprung up after Brander Matthews' *The Philosophy of the Short Story* and spread out until the end of the era dominated by the New Criticism (77); a second wave of short story criticism, developed from the Seventies onward, strove to overcome Poe's authoritative presence as critics regarded his short story framework "as an obstacle to be surmounted" (78).

The second section of the book brings to the foreground the short story under the conspicuous scrutiny of discourse analysis, cognitive theories and pragmatism. This part opens with the study entitled "Frames Speaking: Malamud, Silko, and the Reader" by the late Per Winther, to whom the volume is dedicated. Winther examines Bernard Malamud's "The Magic Barrel" in relation to two stories by Leslie Marmon Silko by applying the notion of framing that "has proved itself analytically fruitful in the hands of a number of short story critics" (89). Winther diverges from Teun A. van Dijk's articulation of global structures in discourse as well as Ian Reid's set of framing categories so as to offer alternative readings which go beyond the fairy-tale traditional analysis of Malamud's anthologized story. In "A Cognitive Approach to Short Story", Pilar Alonso compares long and short narratives produced by the same authors and examines samples by John Updike and Eudora Welty. In consonance with cognitive theoreticians,



Alonso claims that “the unique quality” that both authors claim “for the imagined worlds and their cognitive processes” resides in the skillful way “they obtain exceptional artistic results by performing” the same type of cognitive operations and linguistic devices employed by most of us in communication (114-5). Alonso concludes by pinpointing the benefits obtained in the application of cognitive operations as key factors in the development of narrative genres.

In “Code-Switching as a Strategy of Brevity in Sandra Cisneros’ *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*” Consuelo Montes-Granado examines the use of Spanish words and phrases in Cisneros’ stories and recalls how the Spanish language had become a symbol of resistance in Chicano literature in the 1960s and 1970s. Montes-Granado states that the need to reach a wider readership prompted some Chicano writers to turn to English as the vehicle of expression in their writing. The presence of code-switching in Cisneros may thus be regarded as tokens or symbols, the use of “Spanish words or short phrases” becoming a sort of “brushstrokes of paint in the hands of an artist – unobtrusive, but loaded with meaning” (136).

In “The Yellow Hybrid: Gender and Genre in Gilman’s *Wallpaper*” Carolina Núñez Puente analyzes Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” from a hybrid approach based on the femininity and sexuality of the protagonist and the gothic and realist nature of the narrative. Bearing in mind the hybrid nature of Gilman’s text – termed as diary, short story or autobiography – Núñez Puente falls back on Bakhtin’s notion of dialogics, articulated by the Russian author in novels written by male authors, and applies it to this short story written by a woman. In the case of Gilman’s short story, Núñez Puente demonstrates that the hybrid voices perceived in the narration belong to the narrator and the “author’s voice” that contradicts her words (143).

Rebeca Hernández explores the limits of storytelling in “Short Narrations in a Letter Frame: Cases of Genre Hybridity in Postcolonial Literature in Portuguese” as she examines three narratives in Portuguese which may have traditionally not been regarded as short fiction. In this sense, Hernández analyzes Mozambican writer Luís Bernardo Honwana’s letter “Rosita até morrer”, Angolan writer António Jacinto’s “Carta de um contratado” and a letter included in the novel *Chiquinho* by Cape Verdean writer Baltasar Lopes so as to prove that

“irrespective of the genre these letters adopt” all those examples share “functional conditions” which affect the reader “in the same way the short story does” (156). The importance of this study lies, however, in the hybrid nature of these texts based on the orality which enables authors with the possibility of fusing orality with marginality in order to create a subversive style which shakes off their social subjugation to the metropolis.

The study penned by María Jesús Hernández Lerena sets up a connection between short fiction and testimony literature. In both forms of fiction, knowledge is challenged making it almost impossible to get an intelligible explanation of our experience (175). Hernández Lerena departs from the notion of visual shock and the subsequent paralysis of rational thinking undertaken by Walter Benjamin and Susan Buck-Morss and their correspondence to testimony literature, characterized by an eyewitness. The short story, as Hernández Lerena contends, manifests a strong dependence on the visual, a fact that drives readers to be defined as onlookers or witnesses, rather than interpreters or ‘knowers’.

In her contribution to the volume, Teresa Gibert surveys Margaret Atwood’s short fiction through the use of the metaphorical conceptualization that this Canadian author deploys in her fiction. Gibert examines certain devices, such as metaphorical strategies or the figurative language as a way to “enhance the reader’s awareness of literariness and to stimulate closer inspection of her short stories as artifacts” (206). She concludes her study by acknowledging that Atwood’s experimental short fiction applies subversive methods, namely metafiction, intertextuality, magical realism, and points out that those metaphorical strategies may also respond to an interest of language playfulness which also increases the artificial quality of her literary texts.

In “Body Politics: Female Dynamics in Isabel Allende’s *The Stories of Eva Luna*” Farhat Iftikharuddin claims a risky assumption: the short story reflects the feminine better than the novel does while at the same time he focuses on what he believes is a central aspect of the former: the concept of enigma. By addressing that the short story as a genre “captures the sublime within the female body and psyche” (225), Iftikharuddin engages in an analysis in which he defends the

subversion of patriarchal hegemony perceived in Isabel Allende's *The Stories of Eva Luna*. For him, the characters created by Allende are merely constructs, self-created and entrepreneurs, whose powers are to be found in the politics of language and body which target the male characters for an active and cognitive rediscovery of their female counterparts.

The fourth and last section is devoted to postmodern approaches to the short story. In this regard, Luisa María González Rodríguez's contribution explores Donald Barthelme's short fiction "as complex intertextual spaces where collage and intertextuality work on the metafictional paradox between the construction of a fictional reality and the laying bare of that illusion" (251). According to González Rodríguez, Barthelme articulates such devices in order to challenge social, political and aesthetic modes and structures. In "Realism and Narrators in Tobias Wolff's Short Stories", Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan analyzes the role of narrators, the different possibilities of the narrative voices and the minimalist techniques used by Wolff in three short stories. In his insightful reading, Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan exposes the fundamental role of narrators and their reliability as well as the role of the reader, who becomes a key element in the interpretation of the fragmented story, which Ewing Campbell denominated as "truncated plot" (1998:15), one of the key features of minimalist stories. In "The Boundaries of Serial Narrative", Lauro Zavala ventures to vindicate the role of the Spanish language as lingua franca of mini-fiction during the second half of the twentieth century. He supports the claims of those critics who have affirmed that French was the lingua franca of the novel during the second half of the nineteenth century while English became the lingua franca of the short story during the first half of the twentieth century. In this vein, Zavala articulates a taxonomical approach to South American long and short fiction narratives, many of which, due to their particular nature, namely fantastic bestiaries or dispersed short stories, may not have clear counterparts in the literature produced in English.

The volume ends with a panoramic overview of the early twenty-first-century American short fiction by Charles E. May, probably the best-known and most acclaimed critic of this genre. In his article "The American Short Story in the Twenty-first Century", May surveys the American short-fiction at the end of the millenium and the turn of the

century in an attempt to assess the new directions of the genre after the 1970s and 1980s ‘renaissance’. He claims that after the denigration of minimalism, the short story regained its former ancillary position as a fictional form and “once more [it] languished in the shadow of the novel” (300). In his overview, May pays a fitting visit to the fiction of Bobbie Ann Mason, Ann Beattie or Tobias Wolff; he then turns to acknowledge the active role of brand-new voices such as ZZ Packer, Kevin Brockmeier, Ryan Harty or Julie Orringer, whose narratives strive to set up new directions in American storytelling.

In accordance with current critical studies on the short story, Patea’s compilation pays proper tribute to the genre. In it, some articles successfully delve into the history and main features of the form, whereas other contributions offer critical reflections of the short story at the beginning of the new millenium. Despite the fact that the pioneering studies by Charles E. May and Susan Lohafer still loom large in many of the articles in this volume, it seems fitting to acknowledge that Patea has successfully achieved a suitable, enjoyable and thought-provoking combination of critical contributions produced by some of the most acclaimed scholars and younger voices in the field, a collection that may well soon become a remarkable landmark in the development of short story criticism.

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