



Genre Genesis of American Short Stories: A Poetic Aspect

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In contemporary poetics, postmodern literary works of minor genres are often treated as texts devoid of specific generic codes due to their highly experimental nature [2; 5; 6; 13]. Their linguistic diversity and the complexity of the issue itself can be explained by the fact that, on the one hand, they reveal a specific painful mindset of people, confused and desperate “by the absurdity of postmodern world” [3,24]. On the other hand, such literary texts are marked “by deliberate violation of grammatical norms, complicated syntax, unusual images, occasional stylistic means and devices with ambivalent meanings, and ambiguous writing in general” [16, 154], which makes them difficult to read, to comprehend, and to interpret.

A thorough analysis of current literary concepts and tendencies allows us to assume that genre aspect of American short stories became the epicentre of experimentation within postmodern deconstruction, a current literary theory that involves the analysis of literary texts to reveal their undecidability and instability of meaning [7;10]. This process is accentuated by the transformation of genre forms, by their bold combination,

repulsion from tradition, and simultaneously blending/hybridisation into a new subgenre form.

Another problem of the presented literary phenomenon is the key criteria for distinguishing large or short epic forms. In traditional literary criticism, it was just the amount of textual material that was taken into consideration. However, more often in today's literary discussions, scholars [11; 13;17] argue that the small amount of text does not mean the absence of its development, and short story writers, on the contrary, have encountered a paradox: the less they wrote, the more they said.

Moreover, the formal classification (large /short prose) is complicated by two more issues. Firstly, 'minor prose genres' belong to many related phenomena, such as aphorisms, parables, mini-dramas, small forms of children's literature, prose poems, etc. Secondly, postmodern prose is so multifaceted (lyrical, psychological, philosophical, intellectual, absurdist, everyday sketches, humorous, satirical, essayistic, parable, avant-garde, diary, suggestive, different kinds of narration, fable, fantasy, etc.) that it is almost impossible to complete the list of this dynamic creative genre. This complexity in genre classification is a fascinating area of further poetical studies that the research aims to explore in depth.

In contemporary poetics, the term '*American short story*' is used to define a particular literary genre and is synonymous to the terms 'short story', 'novella', 'novelte', 'novella', 'minor forms', or 'minor genres' [11; 12; 17]. However, the first one, in our opinion, is still relevant to the American short story genre with its national identity features of the depicted American reality.

In 1842, Edgar Allan Poe was the first who identified the main features of the classic short story but under the term '*tale*'. It is worth noting that in the nineteenth

century, the term '*tale*' was used to describe a story. Subsequently, the term *story* was coined by G. James in 1883, and the term '*short story*' in 1899 by B. Hart. It is the latter that has gained popularity since the twentieth century.

One of the main contributions Poe made to the developing the short story as a new literary genre in American literature was his definition of its key features, such as: unity of form, integrity, and pre-planned composition. He considered the main difference between the American short story and other genres of minor formsto be the subordination of all poetic means to a single introductory (predetermined) effect of the author. According to J. Taylor, "there should not be a single word in the work that does not directly or indirectly contribute to the author's previous intention" [15, 6].

Through this modification, Poe shifted the reader's narrative focus from mimetic events to aesthetic patterns. He argued that without the "key" of a literary work's overall design or plan, many points would be missed as they would seem insignificant. Surprisingly, but the "**shortness**" of the story reflects the basic paradox inherent in all short narratives: the writer's restriction to the detention of time juxtaposed against his desire to create a structure that reflects an 'a temporal' theme. The ambiguous facet of the "shortness" is, says C.S. Lewis, that for short stories to be stories, they must be a series of events; at the same time, it must be understood that this series is only a net to catch something else. And this "something else" has no sequence in it; it is "something other than a process and much more like a state or quality"[11, 46].Furthermore, the short story "shortness" creates the allusion that understanding of the whole precedes knowledge of the parts, which, according to A. W. Schlegel appears as "that from which no part can be displaced without ruin to the whole"[11, 47], which is also in tune with A. Chekhov's famous

quotation: “Cut a short story anywhere and it will bleed”.

Moreover, the writer’s main task is how to convert a chain of mere events into something significant. This raises the additional problem that even as writers encourage the reader to keep turning pages, they must make the reader realise that what happened was unimportant. Surprisingly, this fundamental incompatibility that many literary critics have noted is much more obvious in short stories than in novels. “The short story’s most general assumption is that everyday experience reveals the self as a mask of habits, expectations, duties, and conventions. But the short story insists that the self must be challenged by crisis and confrontations”[11, 51].

So, to sum it up, “the very “shortness” of the story as well as the necessary poetic devices demanded by this shortness, force it to focus not on the whole of experience in all its perceptual and conceptual categorisation, but rather on **a single experience** lifted out of the everyday flow of human activity and active striving, an experience that is lifted out precisely because it is not a slice of that reality but rather a moment, in which “reality” itself has challenged” [11, 67].

However, theoretical discussions of the short story genre languished until modernism, and the new criticism impeded further development. Surprisingly, those who theorised about the genre were not literary critics but practitioners of this literary form themselves, such as Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville in the nineteenth century and Henry James, Flannery O’Connor, Julio Cortázar and Eudora Welty in the twentieth.

Long domination of the short story genre in American literature is, to our minds, its **lapidary**, or **brevity**, that remains a crucial milestone in short fiction theory and a tricky issue for practitioners. On the one hand, it is

impossible to draw a sharp line and take a definite number of words (1000; 500; 300;100) as its key criteria, saying that any story which contains less than so many ***hundred words*** is short, while a tale which includes one word more is long. On the other hand, we cannot but mention that a short story is ***a story, a narrative, a short sequence of events***. It means that we cannot separate the elements of the compound noun 'SHORT STORY' and focus on the reduction of plot structure, events ordered sequentially through cause-and-effect relationships (logically). In other words, STORY is more than plot, and SHORT means more than temporality.

Due to its small size, such a short story text requires "a straight-line plot development, a couple of characters are presented through direct characterisation, a few brief and concise descriptions (because of the limitations of narrative space)" [4, 4]. In other words, in a small text, its structural and semantic characteristics are quite clearly manifested, and the traditional textual categories (coherence, cohesion, recurrence, information, etc.) are presented in the most concentrated form. These features can be united by the ***concept of brevity***[4, 5;16],which comprises the following parameters: one or three small events, several flat characters presented schematically, and a lack of deep characterisation of their actions and motives. Therefore, it can be argued that the specificity of the American short story lies not in the number of events and characters but in the laconic way they are depicted.

Hence, in this research, the short story genre we understood as a complex entity/unity that comprises brevity of its word expression, lapidary in using poetic resources, and a particular narrative perspective that creates suspense, ambiguity and multifaceted interpretations.

Defining the short story as genre marked by

American identity Bernard Malamud claims that the short story can show the complexity of life in a few pages (see his story "The German Refugee") [1, 7]. He argues that the time given to the author is extremely limited, and you must give the reader the impression that you are deeply aware of what you are talking about. "The strength and beauty of the American short story lies in its brevity, which encourages the author to be unpredictable in his or her creativity, using symbols, different narrative perspective, and in his intentions" [14, 177].

Moreover, the genre was so specific that it was called the "*American sketch*" [1, 3; 12, 20]. Indeed, the first examples of American comic stories conveyed contradictions of American national character: stingy pragmatism and Puritan piety, democracy and intolerance, love for freedom, and the cult of success achieved by all costs. Furthermore, through humorous and satirical descriptions, American short stories highlight traditional customs, everyday life activities, and characters that represent people of different regions of the United States, particularly of the South, Southwest and Northwest. The national culture has been reviled in a highly concentrated way, so it gave the researchers and writers grounds to call this genre 'uniquely American' [see 1; 8; 10; 15; 17].

So, the term '*American short story*' denotes a relatively small literary work, that comprises a short duration of the depicted mostly everyday events, a limited number of flat characters, short descriptions and specific narrative strategies [1, 10]. "Sometimes it highlights moral and social state of a certain social community or society as a whole" [13, 6].

At the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, postmodern fiction, in general, became at the crossroads of social and cultural changes of the postmodern era caused by the intensive presence in

everyday life high digital technologies, mass media, and other forms of audio and visual communication. It is essential to underline that American postmodern culture was oriented towards the mass of consumers, with the corresponding pragmatics of everyday language and semantics of the 'mythological of success'. It was fully reflected in the poetic landscape of American postmodern short stories. That's why postmodern writers in their literary works relied on national culture, folklore, humour, frontier literature, western traditions, country motives, and "black humour" (D. Barthelme, K. Vonnegut, J. Barth, W. Burroughs).

Besides, at that time, postmodernism actualised different "minor" forms of short fiction (essays, memoirs, letters, comments) that were set free from literary canons, restrictions, or stereotypes due to postmodern reconstruction. They actively "mutated" from the genres of high literature to mass literature. It was in tune with the leading genre trends postulated by J.-F. Lyotard as the crisis of the 'great novel', which resulted from the "disintegration of the meta-narrative" [7, 34].

Furthermore, the genre of *the American short story* gained tremendous popularity within postmodern minor forms [1; 7, 75; 12, 76], as short stories reflected not only the dynamics of the American national literature but also substantial socio-cultural and ideological trends in the development of the American nation. Moreover, in the 1970s, American universities included creative writing and literary criticism into their curricula. Short stories provided a convenient genre for teaching the art of fiction writing. Together with minimalist tendencies, all this caused a real 'renaissance of the short story genre', supported by the appearance of new journals, wide publishing opportunities for women, ethnic writers, and civil rights fighters.

Besides, this general so has undergone significant

generic changes: it became an experimental 'creative laboratory' where new methods of literary depiction were introduced, and the already known ones were thoroughly polished. Due to the specific genre characteristics such as flexibility, intertextuality, genre mobility, the possibility of applying new topics and literary techniques, short story writers respond quickly to the demands of new times.

As a result, there appeared radically modified short stories where classical canons were violated, standards of the traditional writing style destroyed, and incompatible with previous literary canons, genres, styles, and narrative techniques were successfully combined. Soon, they created a wide range of various literary experiments in 'minor' genres called **experimental literature** [5;6;13] and 'experimental fiction/prose' [17], the main feature of which was **innovative literary forms** and **narrative techniques** in relatively short texts. Moreover, the rise of digital technologies has brought more opportunities for the digital publishing of short stories online, which became a respected publication venue today.

The size of the text (the number of words), variability and intentional ambivalence of American postmodern short stories clearly demonstrate their text-forming principles and contribute to their genre diversity. Therefore, the hierarchy of American postmodern short stories in terms of their size may look like this: *short story of the 18th -19th century (4000-5000 words)*, *novelette (3000-4000 words)*, *short story (1000-2000 words)*, *concise story (about 1000 words)*, *'sudden fiction' (500 words)*, which includes stories of 1-2 pages, even smaller stories of *'flash fiction'* and *micro fiction*, followed by *drabble stories (100 words)* and *dribble stories (50 words)*.

The newest variety of American postmodern short fiction is, to our minds, 'hint fiction', suggested by an American writer, Robert Swartwood, who included stories

in his anthology of no more than 25 words [14, 24]. For such literary works, essential is the idea of *the author's hint* about further story writing delegated to the reader. The author and the reader are halfway apart from creating a complete story, and therefore, the reader receives just a *hint* for a more extended, more complicated plot of *his/her* story. Despite their small size, hint stories create their unique fictional world; they capture the reader's interest, make him/her think about the numerous hidden allusions and senses, and stir up certain emotions, as in the story "Visiting Hours" by K. Robinson: "She placed her hand over his and pressed the pen to paper. The signature looked shaky, but **it should be enough**" [14, p. 74]. The key to the further development of this story is the phrase "**but it should be enough**", which creates ambiguity towards the purpose of the signature and the doer of this action.

Hence, we may sum up that the essential features of American postmodern short stories became exaggerated hyperboles, semantic and grammatical illogical structures, polyphony of narrators, that emphasise the unnatural, abnormal and fantastic nature of the described reality.

On the one hand, through hyperboles, illogical actions of characters, and unreal (according to logic) situations depicted in such short stories, postmodern writers create the effect of something unusual, beyond the readers' expectations. On the other hand, the harmful content of the depicted phenomena is deliberately presented in a distorted, distorted, exaggerated way. Such exaggerated hyperboles made it possible to interpret the events described in short stories as ugly, criminal or harmful, somewhat vague and ambiguous. It is especially appropriate "when humanistic and democratic values were ignored, and there were contradictions between reason and logic" [8, p. 174].

The formation of the American short story genre dates to the eighteenth century. Focusing on the development of this genre during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we can distinguish pre-postmodern, postmodern, and post-postmodern/metamodern periods [2, 9], each of them having its own poetic peculiarities. Let us dwell on each of them in detail.

The **pre-postmodern period** (the 1930s - 1950s) in the genre of American postmodern short stories was marked by the development of new narrative forms when the monologue domination was transformed into an intertextual dialogue of different voices. Regarding their poetic peculiarities, simple syntactic constructions with reduced replicas of direct speech were often used, which contributed to the emergence of the so-called “telegraphic style” [27, p. 45] of writing.

Due to a unique postmodern poetic technique of **grotesque hyperbole**, which is based on the grotesque caricature and exaggeration of the characters’ appearance, properties/features of objects, and events, the described images/characters became hyper-fantastic, making the objective reality and fantasy blending into a new quasi-reality, utterly unknown to the reader.

The **postmodern period** (1960s-1980s) is characterised by the influence of mass culture on American society: new postmodern short stories are consistently created with the help of purely postmodern poetic means and devices, primarily based on the means of intertextuality. The intensive borrowing of citations from films, songs, and folklore caused the shift in understanding intertexts, which no longer function as isolated quotes or foreign language inclusions but are deliberately used as a postmodern stylistic device realised through the rebirth/rethinking of well-known themes, topics, plots and open to endless borrowings.

The continuous introduction of intertexts into the main body of the story contributed to the formation of mash-up subgenres and numerous adaptations. In such short stories, **postmodern sensibility** [3, 12] became a key poetic device, as it reproduced the chaos of postmodern real life with the artificially created chaos of fragmentary narration-citation in aliterary text. Gradually, the logic and linearity of traditional storytelling were destroyed, the narrative was wholly deconstructed, and a new style of postmodern nonlinear writing came to life. At that time, a permanent game reality manifested in the postmodern language games [4,11], which can be traced at all language levels.

The **post-postmodern period/meta-modern**(the 1990s to the present) is characterised by the emergence of a new type of essayistic consciousness: the author ceases to be self-expression. Hence, the text or the writing process becomes the centre of writing and interpretation, created by the reader “here and now”. It ruined the traditional logical norms of formulating thoughts and ideas and constructing aliterary whole.

That is why such postmodern poetic devices as pastiche, mosaic-like genre-blending, fragmentation, compositional destruction, laconic plot montage, and screen imagination descriptions contributed to new compositional techniques. Among them we distinguish “**television broadcasting**” and “**montage thinking**”, which imitate postmodern thinking and language usage, where lexical units are combined like a montage and form an incompatible, illogical combination of words. Under such circumstances, the reader faces a challenging task: to cope with semantic textual chaos and fragmentation of its fragments, to reconstruct a verbally vague and flickering textual integrity, relying on his own personal “traces” of the textual whole.

To summarise, we may conclude that the American

short story genre is dynamic and encompasses unusual, **blended hybrid generic formations** caused by subgenre diffusion, intergeneric interaction, and genre integration of different kinds. American short story is a literary work characterised by short duration of the depicted events, a limited number of characters and poetic devices, special narrative techniques that create suspense and multiple interpretations. The key features of the American postmodern short story are exaggerated hyperbole, semantic and grammatical illogic structures, and polyphony of narrators.

American short stories viewed through historical and poetic perspectives reflect three stages of their genre genesis: 1) pre-postmodern (the 1930s-1950s), marked by the development of new narrative forms, when the monological dominance was transformed into a dialogic (intertextual) one; 2) postmodern (1960s-1980s), characterised by destruction of logic and linearity of the narrative and the appearance a new style of nonlinear writing; 3) post-postmodern, or metamodern (1990s – present), a new type of essayistic consciousness, when the author is not able to reflect objective reality any more, and the text itself becomes the centre of interpretation, which is performed by the reader “here and now.”

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