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Journal Item

How to cite:

Neale, Derek (2012). Short stories in the academy: mimesis, diegesis and the role of drama and film. Short Fiction in Theory and Practice, 2(1-2) pp. 43–58.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1386/fict.2.1-2.43_1

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Short stories in the academy: Mimesis, diegesis and the role of drama and film

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Abstract

The new prominence of authors teaching Creative Writing in the academy might have seemed unlikely given a critical context that railed against the influence of authors in interpretation. This discussion suggests reasons for an unlikely coalescence between theory and practice, and considers how situating the study of writing within the academy might have affected the short form, giving rise to more mimetic, less diegetic types of story and certain fashions in narrative style, ones often related to drama and film. The discussion considers the workshop vogue for the second person narrative, examining a story by Lorrie Moore; it investigates filmic influences including Sergei Eisenstein's theories of montage; and compares two versions of a story by Raymond Carver story.

Contexts

Short stories are sometimes perceived as the cement between the larger building blocks in an author's oeuvre. They are of critical interest because they offer potential interpretive connections between other genres, between the author's biography and what may be considered the author's major works – often novels. But the stories themselves may, by

default, often be seen to be of less intrinsic interest. There are, of course, major exceptions to this perception, as is the case with authors such as Katherine Mansfield, Raymond Carver and Alice Munro, for instance, who are known primarily for their short fiction. Yet, publishers have tended to see short stories and short story collections as less popular than novels and difficult to sell; this has coloured general perceptions of the genre, perceptions that have on occasions placed short stories as the preserve of the academy.

However, the short story has historically also held a tenuous and sometimes peripheral position within English Studies, and for at least some of the above reasons. This has altered substantially in the modern, post-1970, era, during which the short story has gained a new prominence, one that is still burgeoning alongside the rise in the number of authors entering the academy, as Creative Writing teachers and practitioners. The new prominence (and jobs) for writers might have been thought unlikely given the concurrent, and ostensibly oppositional, critical context, one which railed against the influence of authors in interpretation. This discussion will suggest reasons for an unlikely coalescence between theory and practice, and consider how situating the study of writing within the academy might have affected the short form, giving rise to certain types of story and fashions in narrative style: approaches that are common in writing workshops and which produce a generally less diegetic and more mimetic type of storytelling, one that is often related to drama and film.

This discussion admits to an American bias of influence, an acknowledgement that the long-established US method of writing workshops is an approach that has been crucially influential in the spread of Creative Writing study and the writing of short

stories internationally. Within this method certain common practices have arisen, including the workshop vogue for the second-person narrative. I will examine this, focusing on a story by Lorrie Moore, and also investigate filmic influences including Sergei Eisenstein's theories of montage. I will also examine the pre-eminence of 'showing', and will compare two versions of the same Carver story, one of the versions having been subject to Gordon Lish's controversial editorial influence. The discussion will, in conclusion, consider the various gains and deficits of such influences and methods in relation to practice.

The rise in study of Creative Writing in UK universities from 1970 onwards¹ and accompanying rise in writers facilitating such study can be seen as ironic, contemporaneous as it was with certain critical propositions which suggested a reassessment of the site of the author in literary interpretation. Such essays as Roland Barthes' 'The death of the author' and Michel Foucault's 'What is an author' offered what was generally perceived as a more objective context in which to evaluate textual signification in relation to authorship. As Foucault states:

The task of criticism is not to re-establish the ties between an author and his work or to reconstitute an author's thought and experience through his works... criticism should concern itself with the structures of a work. (1977: 118)

Foucault goes on to discuss criticism's ongoing domination by the 'sovereignty of the author' and describes critics' perceptions of the author's profundity and creativity, intentions and inspiration, as products of the critics' own undiluted subjectivity. Barthes

also lambasted 'reading texts through the author', arguing: 'To give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing' (1977: 147).

These observations give precedence in interpretation to the text and the role of the reader over that of the author and notions of a work's genesis. They also suggest, however, a critical prohibition, disallowing perspectives about, and arising from, the writer. Fruitful lines of enquiry involving personal testimony and focused examination of textual production would seem to have been ruled out. This potential critical dogma was tempered to an extent by practitioner-theorists such as Umberto Eco (in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (1992), for instance). Nonetheless, it posed problems for those involved in both critical interpretation and the production of novels and stories. The novelist and academic Malcolm Bradbury, who launched the United Kingdom's first Creative Writing M.A. programme at the University of East Anglia, commented: 'It seemed somewhat strange for us to be announcing the Death of the Author in the classroom, then going straight back home to be one' (1995: ii).

Any hardened or longlasting opposition between writers of fiction and those who engage in critical interpretation proved spurious, partly because of the productivity and insuppressible rise of writing studies. There arose an unlikely fit between theory and practice because such observations as those of Barthes and Foucault handily matched the 'agenda' of the Creative Writing project. If Creative Writing has an agenda other than the production of strong and effective writing, it is to dispel the genius and inspiration myths that surround the act of writing and what might be termed the historical 'cult of the author': the writer as genius or mysterious progenitor of texts, their inscrutable talent and

distinctive biographies lending them almost divine legitimacy. Writing has been seen in the workshop era as more a question of hard work, routine and assiduous editorial attention. The introduction of Creative Writing into the academy brought a new emphasis, one focused on process and craft, on practical consideration of the drafting process, on the necessity of editing and the faltering, inelegant bravery of first drafts.

I have referred to this history elsewhere (Neale 2011), but will summarize here to establish some necessary background. With the rise of this new discipline there has been a commensurate increase in reflective writing about practice and a new focus – not on the author as signifier of the text but on the phenomenology of writing practice. At the same time there has been a common, if not exclusive, shift in terminology towards the term ‘writer’ and away from ‘author’ (and its connotations of authority). It is worth noting that in comparison to the term ‘author’, a ‘writer’ is more likely to carry the inference of endeavour; they are perceived to be ‘working’ at their practice, seen less as the recipients of inspiration and more as perspirers.

Reflective texts produced in response to the new academic discipline range from those interested in the therapeutic aspects of reflective writing to writers’ literary testimonies about practice, the latter established as a tradition following early and mid-twentieth-century volumes such as *Aspects of the Novel* (E. M. Forster, 1976), *Writers on Writing* (Walter Allen, 1958) and *Mystery and Manners* (Flannery O’Connor, 1970) – the latter attending to short stories in considerable detail. A parallel tradition of discussion with writers about their work emerged with *The Paris Review Interviews* (Philip Gourevitch, 2007), and volumes such as John Haffenden’s *Novelists in Interview* (1985). Similarly, since Henry James famously launched the ‘showing’ and ‘telling’ debate,

many writers have reflected on the writing process in essays or prefatory notes. The latter half of the twentieth century and the start of this has seen an explosion of volumes from writers discussing their craft and art.² There has also been work by academics and literary journalists on the mechanics of process,³ along with renewed interest in contemporary writers' diaries, journals, drafts and drafting methods. This latter scrutiny has seen a parallel increase in archival research and wide-ranging revelations about working relationships between writers and their editors – notably in connection with Golding, Austen and, most pertinently for this discussion, Carver.

Nearly all of this practice-based discussion acknowledges, examines or testifies to a 'writer's approach', but significantly, many of these texts also reveal an awareness of the reader and readership, and perhaps none more explicitly than Francine Prose's book *Reading like a Writer* (2007) – a phrase that features prominently in learning aims for most Creative Writing teaching.

If not clearly dissolving possible oppositions between practice and criticism, the development of this 'writing process agenda' suggests a new egalitarian relationship between writing and reading, author and text, one in which similarities and equivalences between readers' and writers' perceptions are recognized and the mysteries of process are not resolved but at least given fuller exposure.

The short story is often the *modus operandi* in Creative Writing study, where reflective critical commentaries and testimonies about process are commonly required of students, writers, teachers and researchers. The short story, because of its length, is ideally suited to workshop submission, reading and critiquing. With the increase in discussion about short fiction, the heightened awareness of approach and technique

promoted in the workshop has influenced the short story form and resulted in common experiments and stylistic decisions.

In a notable extensive and eloquent survey of the American canon, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (McGurl), the short story is discussed in the context of a major practitioner who taught Creative Writing, Carver, though equally feted short story writers who have also participated in Creative Writing teaching in the academy, writers such as Munro and Moore, are not as visible in the discussion. The short story as a searchable category is absent from the index. Such omissions prompt the need for a more focused critical survey, and greater critical examination, of the effect of workshop teaching and writing practice on the form. After all, the Creative Writing workshop is the venue where the short story is most commonly written, exchanged, read, discussed and formally analysed; it can be considered the form's major stylistic studio.

An example form – the second-person story

Bearing this brief contextual summary of the relationships between the academy, the short story and the author in mind, it is worth noting that workshop critiquing commonly advocates unpacking all 'telling' narrative passages, prompting writers to 'show' more. This sort of advice and guidance emanates originally from James, and gives rise to stories strongly influenced by drama. The claim that short stories have become stylistically more dramatic as a result of the influence of workshop teaching is relatively uncontroversial, but it is worth noting that 'dramatic' can be, and is, interpreted in a number of ways. To add a little historical and theoretical background: James urged himself in margin notes on

one of his drafts to ‘Dramatize! Dramatize! Dramatize!’ (James 265). This was interpreted by many, and in particular by Lubbock in *The Craft of Fiction*, as an exhortation for novelists to ‘show don’t tell’, and developed into a prescription for how ‘good fiction’ should be written:

The art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be shown, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself. (Lubbock 62)

Lubbock went on to criticize intrusive narrators (commonly those found in nineteenth-century novels), and so established a legacy that some perceive as an orthodoxy, one that the Creative Writing workshop embraced. As commentators have noted, this represents ‘a deep penetration of narrative poetics by the techniques of dramatic writing’ (McGurl 99). Yet, as I say, the responses can be diverse. Consider, for instance, James’s idea of dramatization within his own fiction, against Hemingway’s. The former might consist of a well-established sequence of full-set theatrical scenes – what has been termed a ‘scenic method’ – in which the psychology of the characters is well drawn and elicited via the detailed setting and dramatic action. With Hemingway the dramatization might be a more filmic approach, consisting of large sections of terse dialogue much of which is non-expositional but rich in subtext. It is evident in the contrast between these two authors that there is no standard interpretation of what ‘dramatize’ might mean. Eventually a general aim of the ‘show don’t tell’ poetics evolved into a widely interpreted understanding that good fiction was ‘founded on discipline restraint, and the impersonal

exercise of hard-won technique’ and that ‘the dictum “show don’t tell” [might be rephrased] as “dramatize don’t generalize”’ (McGurl 99).

The terms, showing and telling, can also be traced back to Platonic and Aristotelian notions of mimesis (showing, dramatization) and diegesis (telling, summary), as detailed in Derek Neale and Linda Anderson (2009: 129–55), ‘Going the Last Inch’ (Clarke 2001), and *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (Rimmon-Kenan 106–16). The primacy of using a dramatic method is put in perspective in *The Art of Fiction* (David Lodge, 1992: 121–14) and *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Wayne C. Booth, 1991: 3–20), both of which suggest, if in different ways, that narrative is necessarily a mix of showing and telling, and that there is a relative scale of these methods in all fiction. There has been some historical confusion about the use of the terms mimesis and diegesis, but for the purposes of this discussion I will refer to ‘showing’ as mimesis or dramatization, and refer to ‘telling’ as diegesis or narrative summary. It is also worth noting the assertion made by David Lodge, that a more mimetic story is one with relatively more information and less informant; a more diegetic storytelling is one with relatively less information and more informant (1992: 122).

Before considering stories that appear more obviously to have embodied the poetics of ‘more drama’, it is worth considering a type of story that has thrived in the Creative Writing era, one that appears to have arisen because of approaches in workshop and which seems at first glance to be more diegetic: the story written in the second person. This narrative method had been deployed prior to 1970 but only in isolated instances.⁴ It has proliferated in the past 30 years. This may in large part be due to the fact that using a

second-person narration is an encouraged and often used exercise in Creative Writing classes. Such experiments demonstrate to the apprentice writer approaches to point of view and focalization, and the attendant grammatical formations, illuminating the variety and intimacy of an extreme usage that was once rare, but now far more common. The early stories of Moore and the stories 'Girl' (Kincaid) and 'How to be an expatriate' (Hodges) are often given as examples – these last two stories could be seen almost as gender and cultural opposites.

Moore's *Self Help* collection (1985) is perhaps the apogee of the second-person form. The stories contained in it parody the self-help instructional narrative that addresses the self-improver, but the content does not parody readers of such writing. The collection largely consists of Moore's M.F.A. thesis; she studied Creative Writing at Cornell and was taught by Alison Lurie, and went on to teach Creative Writing at Wisconsin University – Madison. Her stories, and the *Self-Help* stories in particular, can be seen to emanate from the poetics of the workshop. To take one example, in her story 'How to talk to your mother (Notes)' (2008: 601–10) the narrative uses the litany, note form and the mock-didactic conventions of the self-help manual, but relocates these narrative methods in a naturalized, psychologically real and mundane setting. The tone contains almost melancholic, weary and guilt-ridden traces of other possible uses of second-person address, as in a personal letter, a song, a final address to the mother. The story has a reverse time span, starting from 1982 and ending in 1939. This is another narrative innovation that is relatively rare – *The Curious Times of Benjamin Button* (Fitzgerald) being one example, one which is more surreal and complicated than Moore's use of the

method, though there have been novels using this tactic since the publication of *Self-Help*, noticeably *Time's Arrow* (Amis) and *The Night Watch* (Waters).

Moore's story is written in juxtaposed strands, each headed by a year and each creating a psychological scene and set of images. Its restraint is manifest in its structural arrangement; there is no lingering over episodes, and it can be seen to be arranged in a form of filmic montage, the whole story running like a montage sequence. It contains dialogue, typically tagged 'she will say' or 'say'; the lines of dialogue give voice to the characters and dramatize them, yet the conventions of a theatrical dramatic scene are not being adhered to; there are no naturalized, continuous dialogue exchanges. The storytelling method appears to be predominantly diegetic, and yet by virtue of the repeated explicit and implied 'you', the narrative engages in a direct form of drama. Its mimesis consists of a two-stranded dialogue, with the addressee, the daughter of the mother in the title, but also in an insinuated fashion with the reader. This form of address both implicates the reader in the action, actively involves them in the daughter's life, invites comparisons with their own life, but simultaneously installs barriers of resistance. The second-person address is insistent, it badgers, is relentless and imprisoning; such narratives can carry traces of the imperative and of reprimand, and it is in evidence here. In this way the method is inherently dramatic, because it carries with it the inevitable conflicts of intimacy. The second-person address and the montage arrangement of episodes dichotomizes the individual character – the method performs the internal dialogues we all engage in, and does so in an insistent fashion. The reader has to work hard to keep up, to keep inventing what is missing, is pressured by the pace and implicated in events by having to imagine what is not provided. In a method which seems

to rely on much internal telling, on diegesis, the dramatization consists in the declamatory voice and this pacey performance of an individual's decisions, responses and behaviour.

The second-person story displays the potential benefits of creative constraint, and writerly restraint. Jamaica Kincaid's 'Girl' deals with the mundane in a similarly effective fashion, yet is dramatic in different ways, largely to do with the use of repetitions and refrains. It achieves a type of poetic litany, that of a young woman, as by contrast Peter Ho Davies's 'How to be an expatriate' (which uses a similar self-help manual-parody voice to Moore's), achieves the litany of a modern young man's progress. Moore's 'How to talk to your mother (Notes)' differs from both in that it is a litany that achieves a dramatized psychology and relatively naturalistic life story.

The uses of montage

In further considering the influence of the workshop and its 'dramatize don't generalize' poetics, together with the varieties of what might constitute 'drama', the influence of film is of great interest, especially the possible uses of montage in fiction, as mentioned in preliminary fashion in relation to the Moore story. H. E. Bates' suggested (1941: 13–25) that 'modern' mass communications meant that writers wrote more filmic, elliptical characterizations, because the reader was already familiar with many more characters and social contexts than say the reader in the nineteenth century, which was Bates's main point of reference; modern readers did not need as much descriptive detail in order to understand a character. The point is that the sort of mimesis that Bates suggested was dramatic by being pictorial and image based rather than dialogue based. At the time of

writing, of course, film was a relatively young medium, but his point remains pertinent in the twenty-first century. Film tells its stories through images, cutting from one image to the next, juxtaposed pictures forming a montage. These images are often partial or incomplete, in accord with how Bates suggested modern characterizations might work. The first major theorist of montage, Eisenstein, suggested different versions of how montage might work and for what narrative purpose. In one of his starting points he examined Edouard Manet's painting the *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (Figure 1). In other contexts Eisenstein also talks of Zola and Balzac and notably of Dickens as sources of inspiration for the montage method; discussion points that will be considered shortly.

Figure 1: *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882), Edouard Manet.

With the *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* what the viewer sees is a character portrayal, a dominant female figure in specific setting, behind the bar serving customers. According to Eisenstein, this woman is severed in half by the counter, only part of her is there. Perhaps this is the same with all characters in paintings; they are only partial representations, we have to invent the rest of their bodies, their histories and personalities, their stories, the rest of their character. Yet, we never see them as ‘anatomically half-people’ according to Eisenstein (1949: 81–82). Showing partial images is a way of creating paradoxically full characters. Something about the partial image engages the viewer’s imagination. We do not think that she is half there – we see from what Eisenstein called the ‘clots of real detail’ (1949: 82) a partial yet close-up view of a character.

What we get from the image is a spark: the viewer starts to tell a story, a story about the context, the woman’s work situation, but also the woman’s regard for it; the flush in her face, and the saddened, uneasy, downward look in the eyes ignites a storytelling imagination, ignites the viewers’ invention of her as a character. The partial nature of the image is key to the pact between the two sets of imaginations, that of the painter and that of the painting’s viewer. The implication is that if too much of a character is revealed the storytelling will not be so readily initiated and may not be possible at all.

That is one way in which montage works in narrative, creating partial juxtaposed images of characters in different situations; partial clips accumulating to invite the audience to invent and perform the surrounding clips and story, to complete the characterization. To screenwriters such as David Mamet montage, and this juxtaposition

of images, is more important to exposition and storytelling than any more prominent film theories or prescriptions, such as the three-act structure, and the inclusion of inciting incidents and resolutions. Mamet suggests screenwriters should strive wherever possible to make silent movies with juxtaposed uninflected images driving the narrative (Mamet 2001). This may sound something of an irony, Mamet advocating silent movies, but the advocacy knowingly plays to the strengths of the medium. Film tells its stories through pictures, and the montage method allows the story to be told predominantly by visual means. It is also a concise method, based on the storyteller giving only partial information; it is both alluring and elegant.

Eisenstein elaborated upon different types and definitions of montage, and perhaps the type that is most famous is the sort of montage that cross cuts from one narrative strand to another, often with a trajectory of convergence. The audience is kept alert by speculation about when and how these spliced strands are going to meet. This is what Eisenstein called ‘the montage of parallel action’. He noted the origins of this method, from its first use with Edwin S. Porter’s short docudrama *Life of an American Fireman* – with shots of the fire crew racing from the station to the fire, cutting to the woman and child trapped in the smoke-filled room. The two strands converge when the firemen arrive and rescue the woman and child.

Eisenstein also, and more prominently, traces the routes of this type of montage to another early film-maker, D. W. Griffith. It is intriguing to read how perplexed and almost outraged the movie executives were at Griffith’s suggestion of a film cutting between a woman waiting at home and her husband stranded on a desert island, longing and plotting to get to her. It is the sort of film storytelling we take for granted nowadays.

The montage creates tension; one strand is about to reach its climax but is left pulsing by a cut to the next strand, so delaying the viewer's gratification. We see a man walking by the cliffs on a windy day, getting ever closer to the cliff's edge, then cut to a woman waiting in a bar looking at a mobile phone, waiting for a call, and in turn being watched by lecherous barman; then cut back to the cliffs, and so forth. In modern day film parlance this type of montage is often just referred to as 'cutting' or 'cross cutting'. It is a technique very much related to the nineteenth-century novel; Griffith was aware of this and cites the explicit influence of Dickens.

This spliced strand form of montage can work in short stories as well, see for instance 'Land of Their Fathers' (Neale 1995) a short story in which one character commits suicide and a second character finds the body – the only time the two characters meet in the story. The narratives of each character were written separately cutting and splicing served to dilute the potential melodrama and solved the structural problem of having a story with two equal-status main characters. In this way it is a method commonly associated with the editing room, though this is not necessarily the case for film or for fiction. Some writers will cut from one point of view and scene to another with no connective narrative, as for instance in the novels *Last Orders* (Graham Swift, 1996) or *Child of God* (Cormac McCarthy, 1975), both of which might be termed 'montage narratives'. Each chapter in the latter is a non-consecutive episode often with an unannounced voice, so the narrative appears like a documentary in its proffering of testimonies and apparent lack of forward drive. Such montage methods are more effective in novels and stories of at least a certain duration, as seen in Munro's story 'Too Much Happiness' (2009: 246–304).

A modern film's 'montage sequence' is not exactly the same as any of Eisenstein's definitions of 'montage', but an accelerated and exaggerated development of what he termed montage, a technique that is widely deployed in films but often denigrated by screenwriting orthodoxies (see for instance McKee 342–44) because they can be overused by scriptwriters. They are often deployed to quickly establish the passage of time or shift in location, the sort of narrative duty that is efficiently achieved in fiction with a diegetic paragraph or two, summarizing events and transitions in the narrative. By contrast to film-makers' modern use of montage sequence, the sort of Eisensteinian montage discussed so far tends to be a concise, poetic cutting method, which is less concerned with exposition (about time or location) and more involved in engaging the viewer's or reader's inventiveness. It's a method that tends to trust an audience's imagination to make connections, to fill in gaps. No narrative can afford to include all details of its history; partial representation and cutting between such partial images is inevitable, but especially so in short stories. Such method matches the restraint and dramatization required by the 'show don't tell' dictum, allowing characters to reveal themselves elliptically rather than being explained diegetically. This is especially pertinent to the short form. It allows scenes to be partial, filmic, often beginning *in medias res*, cutting from one to the next without lingering. This level of restraint and dramatization is prominent in the stories of Carver.

Raymond Carver as mimetic exemplar

Carver's stories are frequently read in Creative Writing workshops as examples because of their size, and because their hard economy of style necessarily requires the

engagement of a reader's imagination, reminding the new writer that they will need this vital accomplice in their storytelling. His stories offer a strong teaching model because apprentice writers tend to experience common flaws in their work. Amongst these are naive structural awareness, overwriting, providing too much generalized summary, which is perhaps a tendency in all first draft work, that of apprentice and established writers (and first draft work is often discussed in workshops). Carver's stories offer examples of succinct writing and tight structure.

Of course, since his death and with the publication of *Beginners* (2009) controversy has stirred about how much of Carver's concision was his own and how much was down to his editor, Lish. This remains controversial, as during his lifetime Carver appears to have seen value in more than one version of the same story, sometimes publishing both. In the context of this discussion, and without attempting to prove any points in relation to the controversy, it is of interest to consider the variety of method contained in two versions of the same story – one, shorter version, entitled 'I could see the smallest things' (Carver 1985: 204–07) – the so-called Lish version,⁵ and the longer version 'Want to See Something?' (Carver 2009: 31–37) – the so-called Carver version.⁶

This is the story of two sets of neighbours who have endured an ill-defined conflict. The conflict remains ill-defined in the longer version. The wife of one household, Nancy, meets the man of the other household, Sam, by accident late at night in the garden by the dividing fence. The main difference between the two versions is the diegetic narrative, the summary backstory, about Sam, how he got remarried and had an albino child. This backstory is largely cut in the Lish version, as is Nancy's final predominantly reported monologue delivered to her sleeping or drunken husband, Cliff. This savage and cutting

outburst, softened by intermittent declarations of love, addresses her partner: 'we were going nowhere fast, and it was time to admit it'. This attitude to the relationship is only ambiguously implied in the Lish version.

The partial characterization of Nancy in the Lish version is recognizable in Eisenstein's description of the barmaid in the Manet painting, and it is this type of non-explicit portrayal that has sometimes found favour in Creative Writing workshop pedagogy and discussion. Yet, it is a method not without dissenters and its own controversy. Because of the partial portrayal, the story is enigmatic, too enigmatic some might say, and a question arises about the story's dramatic action and its movement. What exactly has changed in Nancy as a result of the encounter with her neighbour in the garden? We sense rather than know that Nancy's regard for Cliff has shifted as a result of her conversation with Sam; it is not confirmed. The longer version pins this down explicitly.

Much of the dialogue in the two versions is the same, and in relatively the same sort of quantities, though in the Lish version it is magnified by the sparseness and lack of diegetic narrative surrounding it. The dialogue becomes heightened, even the dialogue tag lines, 'he said', 'I said', appear poetic because of their repetition. The images and the combination of those images, also has a heightened effect as in a form of montage. They are, to use Eisenstein's terminology, juxtaposed unrelated images and actions converging to make a new meaning: Nancy going out to shut the gate; Sam going out to kill slugs – culminating in a realization in Nancy who returns to Cliff in some way changed. The reader is left to interpret what the 'new meaning' might be. This demand on the reader's imagination will be seen as the strength of the method by some readers. The lack of back

story will be seen by others as a deficit. Such diegetic passages of character history, as contained in ‘Want to See Something?’ may interrupt the narrative pace but they also bring rich and essentially human temporal layers to the narrative.

Any debates about the virtues of the so-called Lish and Carver versions are not easily resolved. Both contain dramatic elements and display the kind of restraint and editorial attention advocated in workshops. The longer, Carver versions of the stories retain a concision despite the inclusion of more diegetic passages. Both sets of stories have in common with Moore’s second-person narratives an engagement with the reader, an engagement that demands effort and imagination.

In conclusion – the workshop effect in practice

As previously mentioned in reference to my story ‘Land of Their Fathers’, methods common in the workshop such as montage have often featured in my working practice, though it is impossible to gauge precisely whether such practice has arisen through my familiarity with the workshop, or with film and its mode of storytelling, or with the stylistic zeitgeist. For instance, in writing a recent flash fiction entitled ‘She Shot My Chimes’ (not yet published), I found myself using a combination of modes of dramatization and narration that have been covered in this discussion.

The story involves a moment – and in that it is similar to many Carver stories. A young woman, probably a teenager, takes a shot at her parents’ wind chimes. She sits and watches, as best she can in the night, the reaction of her parents as they come out to see what is going on. ‘She Shot My Chimes’ uses a second-person address and responds to

the dramatic imperative – the need to involve the reader in the action – by using a common tactic: it is dialogue-heavy. We hear the voices of the parents. It is also partial in its characterization, refraining from giving any backstory summary (it is Lish-like in this respect); the second-person plural narration (the young woman addressing her parents) offers a parallel restraint. This brand of second person is not mock-instructional (as in the Moore and Davies' stories), but is more like a form of letter or diary, one which acknowledges the impossibility of the addressees (the woman's parents) ever getting the message. With the Moore story, the second-person narration carries a subtle, residual imperative tone, a sense of regret and of reprimand. 'She Shot My Chimes' uses a far less insistent second person. It carries more blame than promise, though who is being blamed is at times ambiguous:

You both step out onto the decking, gawp into the dark in your white dressing gowns. Snow flakes in summer.

The 'you' is only explicit at the start of the story, the blame evident in the verb – 'gawp' and the comparison to snow. Thereafter the 'you' disappears, so the narrative becomes more of a hybrid containing three voices – it is at the same time first, second and third person. This demonstrates the nuances and sheer variety available with such methods of dramatization, and perhaps how in particular second-person narratives have evolved since the early renaissance in their usage, when they were commonly mock-instructional. However, a stylistic trend cannot be accurately diagnosed from one brief narrative. It is

only safe to say that use of the second person has now become not only commonplace but also more varied than it once was.

‘She Shot My Chimes’ contains no dialogue tags, no explicit identification of speakers, so the reader has to invent from what is said which parent is which:

‘What was it?’

‘She shot my chimes’.

‘Never knew you had any’.

The non-attribution of dialogue, relatively common in workshop length stories, does not exactly follow the style of Cormac McCarthy (who tends to use dashes and no quote marks), but nonetheless trusts in the reader to decipher voices, contrasts and oppositions, and hence story. The end paragraph culminates in the use of an ambiguous pronoun – ‘The chimes babble like bloody birds. I think about it. The jasmine’. One possible effect of this might be for the ambiguity (of ‘it’) to compound the elliptical nature of the portraits and scene. In relation to some commonly used workshop exemplars, on reflection, the setting of ‘She Shot My Chimes’ carries a small flavour of ‘Want to See Something?’, it has a significant moon hanging over events, even if the garden is very different and there is a rather unsubtle gun overshadowing the scene. Its content (with the suggestion of a failed love affair and even a possible pregnancy) could also be seen to contain a hint of Hemingway’s ‘Hills Like White Elephants’, which is another often used workshop exemplar because of its concision, vivid scene and glorious lack of explicitness. It is difficult for a writer to discuss direct influences on a particular

narrative, or even parallels. 'She Shot My Chimes' is not on the same register as those two stories, but it attempts a similar visual dramatization, using filmic methods in establishing the long shot and wide-angle shot, from a vantage point and cutting between near and far in a montage, between the sky and the decking, between the dramatic scene and inner thoughts, the latter merely implied by the narrator/camerawoman's loaded words – such as 'bloody' and 'gawp'. These are the various ways in which the story is operating as a dramatic narrative, attempting to 'show not tell'.

However, as with many flash fictions, it raises a query and a possible contradiction – does it show enough to make sense? The story in its final form is under 1,000 words long and is riddled with ambiguity and enigma, brought about because of its chosen form and length. This form imitates its setting – outside, at night, in the dark – by not explicitly identifying a distinction between the two characters in dressing gowns, the parents. Things are not clear; how could they be? The most puzzling aspect for some readers might be the missing genders of the speakers. We soon learn that the narrator is a woman but the two characters on the decking are never confirmed or distinguished as mother and father, woman and man. This can be read into it, though different readers might bring different genders, family arrangements and gender couplings to the story. Some readers will no doubt not notice. But could the characters be two men, for instance, or two women? Could the reader end up questioning whether it matters, or perhaps questioning their own assumptions about how mothers and fathers behave? Some readers will savour their role in the invention of the story, others will feel short-changed.

There is a certain irony in that the ongoing advocacy of ‘showing’, within the poetics of the workshop, and by others, has come to mean that some stories are seen to be working well when elements of the story are not quite apparent. As McGurl says of a particular Carver story – ‘since this is a Raymond Carver story, none of this will be made entirely clear’ (276). It is true that a lack of clarity can on occasions reveal a lack in the writing, but in respect of Carver, whatever version of a particular story, that lack of clarity tends rather to reveal a writer’s respect for his reader and his art.

Bates said that Dickens played the game of underestimating his readers (1941: 15), giving abundant information on his characters, as was the nineteenth-century fashion, and often repeating that information because of the demands of serialization. Contemporary short stories that use ‘workshop methods’ are often at the other end of the spectrum in the way in which they tend to revere and respect their readers’ imaginations. They are often narratives that have a heightened, a reminded, awareness of audience – as if someone in a workshop at some point, or perhaps some editor, has said – ‘But what about your reader? What are they inventing? They’ve got to write this story too’. And in this respect workshop exchanges often nowadays replace those exchanges that once took place between writers and their editors.

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Notes

¹ By comparison it was already relatively well established in the United States, where the first Creative Writing M.F.A. was launched in the 1930s. (see McGurl).

² The list is long and includes *Negotiating with the Dead* (Atwood); *The Faith of a Writer* (Joyce Carol Oates, 2003), *Steering the Craft* (Ursula K. Le Guin, 1998), *Making an Elephant: Writing from Within* (Graham Swift, 2009), *The Art of Fiction* and *The Practice of Writing* (David Lodge, 1992 and 1996, respectively), and most recently *The Naïve and Sentimental Novelist* (Pamuk) and *Confessions of a Young Novelist* (Eco).

³ Such as *How Fiction Works* (Wood) and *How Novels Work* (Mullan).

⁴ See for instance, Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'The Haunted Mind'

⁵ From *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*; the version discussed here published in the collection *Stories* 1985.

⁶ In *Beginners* 2009.