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The short story: The long and the short of it

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Abstract

Structuralism establishes that genres have to be specified at least in part relationally, in terms of each other. What is often unrecognized, however, is that relations between genres need not be symmetrical. This paper examines some of the asymmetries in the relation between the short story and the novel, focusing on the former as a dependent and marked genre (or countergenre) with respect to the latter, now the dominant, normative genre for prose fiction, if not for literature as a whole. This asymmetry is articulated in a number of ways, both in classical short story theory and in the short story practice of the last 150 years. For instance, the fact that theoretical discussion of the short story invariably departs from and centers on the (purely relative) idea of shortness attests to the normative presence of the novel. In modern short story writing, the sense of the short story as incomplete or fragmentary with respect to the wholeness of the novel helps explain the dominance of short story structural types like the moment-of-truth, the exemplum, or the joke. Other fairly generalized trends in the short story, such as orality and experimentalism are studied in terms of the short story's status as minor and lesser genre with respect to the novel.



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