

The novel as short story

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ABSTRACT

In recent history, the novel has been thought of and defined primarily as a long prose narrative. However, this has not been the case historically, as the original meaning of "novel" was for "a piece of news" or "a short story or novella." Returning to this original definition, I propose a new way of viewing the work known contemporarily as the novel as a collection, or sequence, of united short stories rather than a single indivisible work, with the component short stories or novellas comprising the sequence renamed as "novels." A brief examination of several classic works traditionally considered novels serves to illustrate how this change in definition will affect reading.

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1. Introduction

Any student of genre studies is well aware of the perils of definition, and this is nowhere more apparent than with the novel, a genre which has proved notoriously elusive to define and pin down over time. The only definition of the novel which at first glance invites no contention, that of a "long prose narrative" is also, frustratingly, a definition so devoid of any real meaning as to render it useless. Yet even this most bland of definitions is susceptible to challenge. For the term "novel" can easily be redefined to mean "a short story or novella," and those works which have traditionally been known as novels subsequently redefined as short story sequences, collections where the stories can be treated both independently and connected thematically.

There is historical precedent for viewing the novel in such a fashion: the earliest usage of the term defined novel originally as a "piece of news," which then developed into that of a short story or novella (*Dictionary* 1999). It was only with time that the term novel came to be associated with the long prose narratives (for lack of a better definition) to which it are exclusively applied today. When Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote*, for instance, the term he used for the work was not "novel," but "history." He instead reserved "novel" to describe a brief interlude in the main narrative of the story during Chapters 33-35, a interlude modern readers would describe as a short story (Cervantes 2003/1615). Defining "novel" to mean short story or novella, then, is so much a new idea as it is the resurgence of an old one.

Nor is the idea of a short story sequence with interrelated tales, characters and themes original either. The most famous of this type of collection include James Joyce's *Dubliners*, William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. How then would one go about determining whether sections of what is contemporarily called a novel (works including *Don Quixote*, *Gulliver's Travels* and *Ulysses*) are in fact independent short stories and novellas (or novels), or whether these sections are so thoroughly parts of a larger, homogenous whole that they cannot be extracted from this greater work? To me, for any piece to be considered an independent novel (here meaning short story), it must meet two chief criteria.

First, a novel must be more or less coherent when read independently of the work as a whole; and removing the novel from the sequence must not damage the sequence in such a way as for it to be rendered meaningless. I do not think anyone will deny that some selections can have more of an impact and be more important to sequences than others, as the same is true of sequences which define themselves as consisting solely of short stories. Undoubtedly, removing "Eveline" from *Dubliners* would rob the collection of a wonderful piece, but would not damage it in such a way as to cripple the overall sequence. If, however, removing a particular novel causes the entire sequence to become something akin to gibberish or lose meaning entirely, then the sequence must be a larger, single work. Similarly, if the novel is incapable of being read and understood on its own without any outside knowledge whatsoever, then it is not an independent work, but must be part of a larger whole.

2. Reading Experiments with Classic "Novels"

Will this definition bear out the expected fruit? An (extremely) brief survey of several of the most famous works commonly called "novels", or long works of prose done through the aid of this new filter will serve as the beginnings of an investigation. In fact, many of what might be called "classic" novels are already subdivided within the works themselves into smaller units. The most basic of these units is the chapter, but while a chapter of a work may be able to be viewed as an independent novel, larger sections can also be so. Consider, since mention has already been made of it twice, *Don Quixote*. Removing Chapter VIII of Part I, the infamous "tilting at windmills" scene, does not irreparably damage the sequence (though it does rob it of one of its most sublime and famous moments). Even if he never charges down what he believes to be a giant, Don Quixote's adventures will continue in some other form. But Chapter VIII does not fulfill the other requirement of a novel; for if it is read in isolation, the reader has no idea why Don Quixote thinks a windmill is a giant in the first place. The madness of the man is apparent, but not the reason for it, and without an explanation for why Don Quixote is spouting pieces of romantic literature, the reader is utterly baffled. The importance of deciding where to distinguish novels is thus demonstrated, for there is a division of *Don Quixote* which easily fulfills both criteria--the sequence itself is divided into two separate parts, which were even published separately. Both function capably as independent novels. In both the reader learns quickly of Don Quixote's madness and its cause, then proceeds with the knight errant of La Mancha through a series of adventures. Part I's conclusion, with a series of sardonic epitaphs over Don Quixote and Sancho Panza's graves, could easily serve as a conclusion to the sequence as a whole and is fully capable of being read and understood independently of Part II. The same can be said of Part II; though the beginning may be slightly confusing for someone who has never read Part I, the premise is quickly established and all the events of the novel occur completely independent of what has taken place in Part I. *Don Quixote* then is an sequence of these two novels, which we have come to know as *Don Quixote, Part I* and *Don Quixote, Part II* when we could very easily have known them as independent entities entirely.

The same is true of *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gulliver's Travels*, other classic works traditionally called novels in the sense of long prose narratives. Both works identify within themselves natural points of division between individual novels by being divided up into multiple, self-contained sections. Much like *Don Quixote*, Part I of *Pilgrim's Progress* (originally published as the complete work itself) easily functions as a novel; the only difficulty in determining whether a section can serve as an independent novel comes with Part II. Fortunately, again like *Don Quixote*, Part II of *Pilgrim's Progress* is also capable however of functioning as a novel. In the first few pages, Bunyan establishes both the necessary background for the story concerning Christian's pilgrimage, before moving on to introduce his family preparing for their own (Bunyan 1966/1678). Thus *Pilgrim's Progress* Part II is its own independent novel, able to function apart from the main sequence. Nor is the main sequence irrevocably damaged by removing Part II, as Part I imparts all the necessary lessons of the work, with these lessons being repeated in a different form within Part II. The same is also true of the novels contained within *Gulliver's Travels*. The four novels comprising the sequence each exist in their own-self contained universe; the Lilliputians never meet the Houyhnhnms, and Gulliver himself makes almost no mention of the other adventures on which he has embarked during the course of a particular one. Removal of any one of the individual novels keeps the sequence's focus on a critique and satire of human nature, while the removed novel is easily read and understood by itself as an individual work of satire. To show that such a division by listed sections of a work is possible also with modern works, we may turn to *Atlas Shrugged* where reading any of the book's individual sections by itself is more than enough to see the worldview Rand is advocating and learn any relevant information about the main characters and their society and philosophy (one might be tempted to suggest that reading the work in such small "dosages" is a much more enjoyable way to encounter the work rather than in its current, sprawling leviathan form). Even when there is overlap between parts of both characters and societies, these works can still be viewed as short story sequences comprised of individual, independent novels.

The same reading is possible for more modern works as a similarly brief survey will demonstrate, though of course an exhaustive list is impossible due to the constraints of time and space. Given both its fame (or infamy), as well as its relation to one of the most famous short story sequences, Joyce's *Ulysses* is deserving of attention. The truth is *Ulysses* is very much in the tradition of *Dubliners*, with the work very easily thought of as a short story sequence rather than a homogenous, undivided monolith (Joyce originally conceived of the faux-*Odyssey* as a story to be included in *Dubliners*, but scrapped the idea before making it a stand-alone work). It is possible to read either the Telemachiad with Stephen Daedalus at the work's beginning, or The *Odyssey* proper with Bloom as isolated novels, even given Daedalus's appearance in the latter section. Further, many of the individual

chapters within these two sections themselves can also be read as independent novels, and given the nature of *Ulysses*, reading them in such a manner still means the chapters illustrate the tumultuous private lives of human beings complete with Joyce's stylistic arsenal without damaging the coherence of *Ulysses* if they are removed from the work overall, thus fulfilling our two established criteria. Indeed, given which chapters one might choose to excise, readers could potentially find the new short story sequence to be easier to comprehend and understand than *Ulysses* as it currently stands (though whether they would be correct or incorrect to do so is not a discussion we will become involved in).

The same is true of a novel which in terms of composition is about as far removed from *Ulysses* as a work can get: Mann's *Doctor Faustus*. Many of *Doctor Faustus's* chapters can serve as self-contained narratives, bound together in the overall sequence only by Zeitblom's stitching in a manner similar to the encyclopedic nature of *Moby Dick*. In both works, a vast amount of knowledge about the natural world and the human spirit are disseminated and chronicled through a group of characters and their relations to one another in largely episodic chapters, which can be alternatively very isolated, or connected with one another. Many of these chapters focus on one or two specific events: the buildup to them, their occurrence, and then the fallout along with the interpretation of the narrator (either Ishmael or Zeitblom) on their purpose or larger significance. *Moby Dick's* encyclopedic chapters are obviously not of this type, though they do bear similarity to several of the chapters in *Faustus* which deal exclusively with laboratory chemistry and musical theory rather than obvious advancement of the plot. Thus, many of the chapters in these works already fit the basic format of short stories with their singular focus and a wide, ever-shifting array of focus between individual pieces. Though when all viewed together a linear story is more or less presented by both works, the method of reaching the conclusion is hardly a strict path; rather, it branches out into both the emotional lives of the characters as well as encyclopedic examinations of the world and phenomena included therein.

Rather than be viewed as a unified whole, then, both narratives can easily be seen as short story sequences with various chapters or collections of chapters meeting the requirements proposed above for the individual components to serve as independent novels. Considering *Moby Dick*, for instance, if only individual sections and not the work as a whole are presented to readers, the chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale" is almost always one of the excerpted chapters, able to stand rather easily on its own and also give a sense of the main themes and scope of *Moby Dick* as a whole, something the best short stories in a sequence do. With *Doctor Faustus*, a comparable example might be Adrian's conversation with the Devil, but it must be pointed out that it is not a requirement that a particular section of a work be capable of functioning both on its own and as a microcosm of some larger narrative or thematic picture to be considered an independent novel and the entire work a sequence, merely that it is possible. And in the cases of *Moby Dick* and *Doctor Faustus*, two more classic works in the Western canon, both can be read as short story sequences communicating narrative and thematic frames through individual novels/short stories which can be viewed either on their own or as interlocking cogs in a larger, patched together mechanism.

3. Viewed From the Short Story

Much of the scholarly work done in this area has been by short story theorists, but this should in no way be seen as a deficiency in the literature itself. In fact, an interesting pattern emerges when studying critical works on the relationship between what are commonly thought of as "novels" (our sequences) and short stories. Often there seems to be little or no structural difference between these works, with readers creating the difference and delineating themselves between the two forms based on prior expectations rather than clear criteria.

Suzanne Ferguson "has spent much of her academic career trying to discover whether the short story is in fact a distinct genre from the novel (Fallon et al 2001)." In her essay "Defining the Short Story: Impressionism and Form," Ferguson concludes that where many readers perceive the short story as an independent form from the novel, a better template for viewing the differences between the short story and the "novel" is through impressionism--that is, as a function of content-- and not genre (1982). (For our purposes, the important part of Ferguson's conclusions is the generic similarity between the "novel" and the short story.) Ferguson goes farther, stating that "The main formal characteristics of the modern novel and modern short story are the same", before going on to list these characteristics (1982). In a separate essay, "The Short Stories of Louise Erdrich's Novels", Ferguson remarks in support of the hypothesis that "the short story is formally not so much an essentially

separate and distinct genre as that a fiction is *read* differently when it appears as a story rather than as part of a larger unit...(1996)."

Ferguson's analysis then seems to support the notion that a collection can just as easily be read as a series of novels as it can a single work. The only real obstacle it seems, to conceiving of the novel as a short story and the larger work as a collection of novels is that of convention, and how the reader views and conceives of works in relation to larger genre categories. John Frow discusses this principle in a somewhat broader context in his work *Genre* where he proposes that "...it follows that genre is not a *property* of a text, but a function of reading. Genre is a category that we *impute* to texts, and under different circumstances this imputation may change (2006)." If a reader spends years thinking the definition of "novel" is a long prose narrative, then *any* long prose narrative is a "novel."

4. Reading Experiments and Authorial Intent

In this line of thinking, it is interesting to note an experiment conducted by Suzanne Hunter Brown, who describes reading chapters of Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* first as parts of a larger work, and then alternately as individual short stories, or for our purposes, novels (1982). What Brown discovered is that the chapters were equally capable of being read as independent novels and as parts of a larger work in a collection. The only thing that changed between readings was the reader's expectation and perception of the selected chapters based on whether the reader viewed them as short stories or excerpts from a larger work (Brown 1982). The same thought experiment can be done with the pieces mentioned above, and similar conclusions can be drawn. In many cases, the substance and meaning of a work is not altered by viewing the text as a collection of novels rather than a unified text; the only change is the genre meaning which the reader imputes, to borrow Frow's terminology, to the work based on the reader's prior expectation.

On a related note, it is certainly worth mentioning authorial intention within these works. Surely, the argument must go, the authors of our works conceived of them as unified, independent works and not as collections of interrelated novels. At the risk of sounding callous, I have to say that this objection is fairly insubstantial. No real concrete differences emerge when reading a longer work as comprised of several novels as compared to reading the work as a unified whole, especially given the fragmentary nature of most of our works, where the narrative is frequently divided into parts by the work itself. Just as Frow states above, the only difference between the two are the categories to which readers assign each respective work. Whether the author intended to write a singular work or a collection of works is somewhat irrelevant in this case.

5. Conclusion

Much of the work discussed above leads to the conclusion that the fundamental reason "novels" and short stories are separated into different genre categories is due to convention and reader expectation rather than some inherent structural characteristic. There is nothing, then, which prevents us from applying this analysis to redefine novel as meaning short story or novella and relabeling "novels" as short story collections or sequences. As Ferguson states, "a sequence should be linked in development (going from one place to another), whether in time or theme (2003)." This definition is extremely applicable to the works we have read thus far. Thus, what we contemporarily view as the "novel"--a long prose narrative--can be construed and redefined as a short story collection, with the term novel being redefined to mean both a short story and novella independent of these larger works, or a story in one of these collections. As long as one is careful delineating where individual novels exist so that the novels fulfill the two criteria established above, then this seems to me a viable definition of the novel. Rather than arguing about generic differences between the short story and the "novel," novel can simply be defined to be identical with the short story which can be collected in sequences. In this way, two genres which should probably have never been separated (short story and novel) can be happily reunited, and a good deal of consternation over genre definitions and differences can be relieved.

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