

Sudleigh: place and politics in the modern short story

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Abstract

This thesis consists of a short story collection and an accompanying critical commentary. The story collection comprises ten linked stories all set in a fictional small town in southern England: the eponymous Sudleigh. The cycle examines ordinary lives within that landscape. While the stories may vary in their naturalism, they are linked by a common setting and a scrutiny of the sociological and political nuances of small-town England. The accompanying critical commentary examines, through the lens of writing technique, how writers have used the realist short story not just to portray snapshots of the human condition but also to engage with the issues central to the societies they inhabit. Through the analysis and discussion of various stories by such writers as Chekhov, Joyce, Mansfield, Hemingway, Carver, Simpson, Kelman and Munro, the four chapters respond to several questions. How can the writer renew the realist short story and make it relevant? How can the writer make the short story both represent and interrogate reality? What role does the evocation of place play in the realist short story and its capacity to construct socio-political implication? It also explores the capacity of the story cycle to expand the short story's socio-political potential, and the suitability of its fragmentary form to portray a fragmented society. In light of the modern, realist short story tradition, the final chapter offers a detailed reflective commentary on the processes and choices made in the writing of *Sudleigh*. As well as exploring such issues as voice, style, compression, structure, endings, editing practice, constructing the fictive town and binding the cycle, the reflective commentary also weighs the nature of my own socio-political engagements, and my efforts to renew the form.

Contents

Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction	v
<u>Part 1</u>	
SUDLEIGH: A SHORT STORY CYCLE	
1 Right to Protest	1
2 The Soloist	22
3 Falling Through the Cracks	39
4 The Things We Should've Done	59
5 We Need to Talk	81
6 Curious the Circle that Turns	107
7 Geoff the Snake	132
8 What's Wrong with Carpets	150
9 A Planted Flag	170
10 The Family Meal	194
<u>Part 2</u>	
CRITICAL COMMENTARY	
Chapter 1: The Realist Short Story: Techniques and Possibilities	220
Chapter 2: Place and the Short Story	244
Chapter 3: Politics and the Short Story	267
Chapter 4: The Short Story Cycle: Extending Possibility	284
REFLECTIVE COMMENTARY	298
CONCLUSION	336
BIBLIOGRAPHY	338

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Introduction

The aim of this project was to write a series of modern, realist short stories which depicted a selection of lives within a fictional town based on Alton in Hampshire. The representation of a diversity of characters and their conflicts was intended to shape a portrait of life in that town. As well as wishing to position these pieces within the long tradition of the realist short story, my intention was also to renew the form, and craft a version which would both explore life as it is now, and interrogate the society within which I live. Thus, whilst the short stories would examine contemporary life from across the social spectrum, they would also, when bound into the cycle form, reflect the divisions and disconnections in modern British society, as well as the atomized nature of life, with people living in close proximity though often with little connection.

Each of the stories in the *Sudleigh* cycle is a tragi-comic slice of life. With characters ranging from old, recently widowed George to young, homeless Tom, from Simon the middle-class Nimby to Sheila, a newly divorced shop-worker, the stories show the town of Sudleigh from a variety of perspectives. Although each of the stories functions independently, they also weave together, with shared topography and characters leaking across narratives, to bind the cycle and enrich the portrayal of life in the fictive middle England market town. Capturing moments of failure, loss, renegotiation and, very occasionally redemption, the stories are intended to render the ply of life that continually surrounds us, but so often slides by unnoticed. However, the stories are also designed to work at a sub-textual level, exploring socio-political themes of fragmentation, cohesion and loss of identity, which then underpin the entire collection. The stories, therefore, are

intended to generate layers of meaning. Not only are they pieces of entertainment which make art from the mundane and reflect life as it is, they also examine and interrogate a slice of contemporary British society.

The urge to use the short story to represent society and map moments from the lives therein is not a new one. It is a lineage that extends from Chekhov's 'aesthetic exploration' of Russian society and James Joyce's intention to hold up a 'nicely polished looking-glass' (Joyce 1966: 66) to society with his *Dubliners* (1914), through to contemporary writers such as Helen Simpson and Alice Munro. Their stories reflect and interrogate not only the human condition, but also, through the personal, the world in which the authors lived. However, each writer must renew the form in their own way in order to represent life as they see it, and to construct their own socio-political engagement with the reality they render through fiction.

The critical part of this dissertation, therefore, examines how writers consistently reshape and renew the short story in order to reflect and respond to life and society, and in so doing explores the form and potential of the realist short story. It is underpinned by three primary research questions: i) How can the writer renew the realist short story and make it relevant? ii) How can the writer make the short story both represent and interrogate reality? iii) What role does the evocation of place play in the realist short story and its capacity to construct socio-political implication? These questions are addressed through close reading, textual analysis and discussion of texts from a range of writers including Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver, Anton Chekhov, James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, Helen Simpson, and Alice Munro. Always the critical inquiry is filtered through the writer's perspective, assessing how narrative techniques and the short story's traits

have been used. This analysis of the writer's technique is further supported by an engagement with such literary critics and theorists as Gyorgy Lukacs, Raymond Williams and Frederic Jameson.

Chapter 1 focuses on the short story's central traits and techniques, whilst also assessing how the form can be constructed in order to ask questions and engage, sub-textually, with social, political and philosophical issues. Through a series of close readings, the chapter analyses how writers have consistently renewed the form, with voice, style, technique and structure in order to achieve this for their own diverse purposes. Moreover, it assesses how the short story, though unable to render the 'totality of life' (Lukacs 1971: 51) can suggest the whole life, metonymically. In so doing, the chapter also explores the potentials of the dramatic slice-of-life, the impressionist short story, as well as polyphonic, monologic and radically non-linear versions of the form, with readings of Hemingway, Mansfield, Simpson, Kelman and Munro.

Chapter 2 then considers the use of place within the short story, not only as a part of the short story writer's technical arsenal by which he/she can build the story world, shape tone and affect compression, but also as a means by which to access and establish a socio-political context within and against which the narrative action can work. Thus, it assesses place not only in terms of short story technique, but also as a foundation upon which the writer can build his/her own representation and response to his/her own society. The chapter goes on to discuss how the short story can capture moments from the 'changing historical realities' (Williams 1975: 289) of cultures.

Chapter 3 surveys how different writers have used the short story to respond to their own socio-political contexts. In this, the chapter establishes that the form, despite its smallness,

has been repeatedly crafted into a socially symbolic act. To do this, the chapter historicises the short stories of several writers and examines how they have used the short story to construct a range of social and political responses to the cultures in which they lived.

Chapter 4 then examines how the story cycle can amplify the short story's socio-political capacity when stories are placed in connection with one another. It assesses how writers like James Joyce, Pat Barker and Helen Simpson have not only constructed their short story cycles, but how these have been used to engage with a variety of social and political issues and contexts. Furthermore, it discusses how the non-linear cycle form is ideally suited to shaping a multi-faceted representation of a fictive society and the atomized nature of life therein.

Following on from this, the reflective commentary explores the choices and decisions made during the writing of *Sudleigh*. It evaluates my effort to renew the short story in my own way, to my own ends, discussing the metonymic slice-of-life style stories I've developed, along with the voice and narrative positions adopted. In terms of story technique, it assesses how compression, omission and story structure have been employed then acknowledges my editing practice and its centrality to my writing style. I go on to examine how the fictive town's story-world has been incrementally constructed across the stories, and how place has been used not only to shape verisimilitude and achieve compression, but also to situate characters socially and create a context against which my own socio-political statements can be constructed. It then goes on to analyse the socio-political engagements layered into *Sudleigh's* stories, addressing the manner in which they interrogate society and tangle with the themes of fragmentation, cohesion, and loss of identity. As well as discussing how the stories are patterned against one another with subtle

oppositions and linkages, I also examine how the gathered stories work together to further extend socio-political implication, and how they combine to generate a polyphonic portrayal of the class and generational divisions currently playing out in British society.

The choices discussed in the reflective commentary, therefore, connect the research undertaken in the critical commentary to my own writing practice and artistic intentions. By examining the technical issues along with the creative and critical contexts involved in the production of *Sudleigh* and its dramatic, tragic-comic short stories, the project explores how I have attempted to fashion my own 'nicely polished looking-glass' (Joyce 1966: 66) with which to reflect the human condition in a corner of middle England.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Chapter 1

The Realist Short Story: Techniques and Possibilities

It might be easy to assume that, due to its brevity, the modern realist¹ short story is a simple, limited form which can say little about life, or the times in which we live. However, looking more closely at short fiction and its history, we can see that the short story is a flexible, versatile, and complex form capable of punching well above its weight, a form which, despite its smallness, can engage with the big issues and which can not only represent life but also interrogate it.

Through an examination of the traits and techniques used in five modern realist short stories, this chapter will not only explore the nature of the form, but also assess its protean possibilities. Moreover, the chapter will investigate how writers consistently reshape and renew the short story in their efforts to cheat the form's restrictive limit and make it as expressive as possible.

Perhaps the best place to begin is with a seemingly simple, drama-like, slice-of-life short story such as Ernest Hemingway's 'The Killers' (1927b). In this story, two gangsters

¹ In this project, realism/realist refers to the representation, through language, of that which could plausibly exist in the 'common-sense' (Warburton 1995: 90) reality that we unthinkingly accept on a day-to-day basis. 'As long as things look like the things we know and behave in a plausible manner, in a spatio-temporal universe we believe to continue to exist, the art is acceptable' (Earnshaw 2010: 275) Realism here does not refer to the C19th literary movement, with all its attendant formal expectations. Rather, it refers to realism as literary aesthetic, and the urge to represent and reflect life 'as it is', conjuring a plausible reality, with the quality of verisimilitude, that is, that which has the appearance of truth or reality without itself being the real or the true itself.

enter a small-town America lunch-room, eat, tie up the cook and the sole customer, Nick Adams, as they wait for Ole Andreson to come in so they can kill him. When Andreson does not arrive, the gangsters leave and Nick goes to warn Ole.

The door of Henry's lunch-room opened and two men came in. They sat down at the counter.

'What's yours?' George asked them.

I don't know,' one of the men said. 'What do you want to eat, Al?'

'I don't know,' said Al. 'I don't know what I want to eat.'

Outside it was getting dark. The street-lights came on outside the window. The two men at the counter read the menu. From the other end of the counter Nick Adams watched them. He had been talking to George when they came in. (265)

With this *in media res* beginning, Hemingway carries the reader straight into the story, the first punchy, declarative sentences establishing the scene and setting the action in motion. The mimetic dialogue then breathes life into the scene and accelerates the narrative pace. As well as adding characterization to the 'two men,' the dialogue, with its Prohibition-era gangster-banter repetition of 'I don't know,' also generates verisimilitude. With pace and efficiency, the scene is already rolling forward dramatically, running almost like a script.

Hemingway's lean, direct prose style then augments this dramatic effect. Using 'no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something' (Pound 1968: 5), his radically objective, external focalization restricts narrative information to 'outside views,' reporting only 'what would be audible and visible to a virtual camera' (Jahn 2008: 98). Indeed, the prose is so stripped back that it takes the form of stage directions, 'The door of Henry's lunch-room opened and two men came in', and tightly framed camera shots, 'the street-lights came on outside the window'. With his thin, almost transparent style, Hemingway accentuates the unfolding drama, fixing the reader's attention firmly on the characters and action instead of on the narration.

'I'll take the ham and eggs,' the man called Al said. He wore a derby hat and a black overcoat buttoned across his chest. His face was small and white and he had tight lips. He wore a silk muffler and gloves.

'Give me bacon and eggs,' said the other man. (265)

Rather than clogging the rapid flow of movement with descriptive pauses, Hemingway removes clutter, weaving just enough detail around the action and dialogue to evoke the characters and scene, and vivify the 'fictional dream' (Gardner 1991: 32). Whilst his rhythmic prose carries the reader along in a seemingly continuous present, Hemingway is consistently reinforcing his realism, with credible characters, dialogue, action and detail. His external focalization style does not describe the characters' psychological states, nor does it offer authorial explanation. Rather, he simply renders the 'hard outlines of the event' (Lukacs 1971: 51), showing 'what really happened in action[...]the real thing, the sequence of motion and fact' (Hemingway 1994: 2). This spare, minimalist prose style and authorial distance ideally complement his drama-like story, foregrounding the drama so that the reader is forced to 'confront the scene directly' (Stuckey 1975: 131).

Skipping forward in the story, we see how Hemingway uses this style to economically shape the story's sub-textual meaning. After Nick is released, he goes to warn Ole about the gangsters' intention to kill him. When he enters Ole's room, he finds him lying on his bed 'with all his clothes on' (271).

'Couldn't you get out of town?'

'No,' Ole Andreson said. 'I'm through with all that running around.'

He looked at the wall.

'There ain't nothing to do now.'

'Couldn't you fix it up some way?'

'No. I got in wrong.' He talked in the same flat voice. 'There ain't nothing to do now[...]'

'I better go back and see George,' Nick said.

'So long,' said Ole Andreson. He did not look toward Nick. 'Thanks for coming around.' (272)

Although Hemingway seems to be presenting the reader with an apparently flat dramatic surface of dialogue, physical action and concrete detail, he is, with an economy of suggestion, crafting meaning beneath the words, shaping a 'landscape just under the smooth[...]surface of things' (Carver 1989: 26). Here, Ole's looking at the wall, metaphorically mirroring his foreshortened future, along with his repeated 'There ain't nothing to do now,' combine to convey his fatalistic resignation to the inevitability of his death. However, in keeping with the short story's much-in-little requirement, the scene is also contrasting Ole's passive submission to his fate with Nick's optimism, 'Couldn't you get out of town?' and his youthful innocence, 'Couldn't you fix it up some way?'

Although the telling of the story may seem almost guileless, it is shot through with essential short story technique. To make the drama flow through from beginning to conclusion, for instance, there are subtle chronological ellipses throughout the text.

'Just a bright boy,' Max said. He leaned forward and took the ham and eggs. Both men ate with their gloves on. George watched them eat.

'What are you looking at?' Max looked at George. (265-6)

Here the ellipsis is masked behind the detail, 'Both men ate with their gloves on.'

This seemingly simple declarative sentence simultaneously employs detail to add characterization to the gangsters whilst clipping away superfluous description of the men eating. Such omissions prevent the narrative from stalling, enabling the drama to run on swiftly, fluently, and maintain dramatic tautness. They also serve to keep the story short. Unlike the realist novel, the short story cannot support expansive description which details everything within a scene, nor can it support the enactment of every miniscule moment. The short form's brevity, the fact that its ending comes so close to the beginning necessitates that there is little irrelevant material within its structure. As Chekhov suggested, 'There should be nothing unnecessary. Everything that has no direct relation to

the story must be ruthlessly thrown out' (Chekhov in Derman 1979: 302). Whereas in the novel some events might be 'only loosely related to the plot and could be eliminated,' in the short form, events 'constitute a stylistically patterned relationship to the central focus of the story' (May 2006: 3-4). In other words, everything included in the short story, should be there for a reason, either to evoke setting, character and action, to move the narrative forward or shape meaning and effect.

However, while Hemingway has removed moments like the gangsters eating, and has suppressed exposition of Ole's backstory giving only minimal information, he has purposefully included an ostensibly extraneous, incidental scene. After Nick leaves Ole's room, having witnessed Ole's acceptance of his demise, he meets the landlady, Mrs Bell, who comments that Ole is an 'awfully nice man. He was in the ring you know' (272). It is a seemingly trivial, expendable moment, and yet this brief scene is vital to the piece. As well as subtly augmenting the story's sense of naturalistic spontaneity, it also serves to accentuate the meaning of the previous scene, with Mrs Bell's comment that Ole is an 'awfully nice man' reinforcing Nick's sense of injustice that something so 'awful' (273) could happen to the Swede.

Against this moment Hemingway then patterns the final scene, with Nick back in the lunchroom.

'I'm going to get out of this town,' Nick said.
 'Yes,' said George. 'That's a good thing to do.'
 'I can't stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get it. It's too damn awful.'
 'Well,' said George, 'you better not think about it.' (273)

It is an ending with which Hemingway stacks Nick's refusal to submit to the inevitability of Ole's death against George's pragmatic acceptance of the situation. And yet,

despite the story's events having been deliberately shaped towards this moment, the ending resists closure. With this partially open ending, the story finishes, effectively, with 'a straggle of dots,' rather than a 'full stop' (Maugham 2001: 206), leaving a sense of inconclusiveness. Unlike earlier well-plotted stories such as O. Henry's 'Gift of the Magi,' (1905) with their closed endings that provide a 'culminating point...[with] the final satisfaction of all curiosity raised at the beginning' (Shaw 1983: 47), at the end of 'The Killers' some of the narrative strands remain unfinished. We do not know if Nick leaves town, or if the gangsters return and kill Ole. Instead, the nature of the ending points towards 'a forward trajectory' (Lamb 2010: 143) that extends beyond the formal boundary of the text, suggesting a future we do not see.

More than just generating a sense of suspense and future at the story's conclusion, this open ending also serves to open a deeper level of implication. By specifically shaping the drama across the narrative's short arc, by suppressing exposition of Ole's fate, by avoiding authorial explanation, and by leaving the ending inconclusive, Hemingway not only involves the reader deeply in the interpretive process, but also opens the possibility of an existential level of meaning. Whilst the gangsters represent the eruption of the irrational into the rational world, and George accepts the meaninglessness of the story's events, of life and the way things are, Nick holds on to his ideal of the way things should be, refusing to submit to the inevitability and meaninglessness of Ole's death. Ultimately, his decision to leave town signifies his refusal to accept the absurdity of the situation. Thus, with an apparently simple, drama-like style, by presenting only the 'hard outlines of the event' (Lukacs 1971: 51), Hemingway demonstrates the modern short story's capacity to represent the 'strangeness and ambiguity of life,' the ever-present 'meaninglessness' and absurdity of existence 'in all its undisguised and unadorned nakedness' (Lukacs 1971: 51-2).

From this first reading, therefore, we have seen how a modern realist short story, with its compressed brevity, its requirement for tight narrative design, its elliptical nature and its tendency towards inconclusiveness does more than just catch a slice-of-life. Here it not only renders a moment in Nick's life, a turning point when he is forced to face life's harsh truths, but it also reflects the brutality just beneath civilization's thin veneer in Prohibition-era America.

In many ways, 'The Killers' exemplifies the authorial frugality central to the short story craft. It is a form where less is often more. In Hemingway's case, by providing only minimal detail and description, by omitting chunks of time, by showing only a tightly framed episode from the characters' lives, he demonstrates how the short story, due to its brevity, does not render the 'totality of life' (Lukacs 1971: 51), but instead presents an expressive, elliptical fragment cut from a life. And this is part of the short story writer's challenge. Indeed, it is to some extent the art of the form; to make the fragment as expressive as possible. The writer has to balance what to include and exclude, with the restriction of brevity inviting invention as he/she tries to simultaneously exploit and cheat the limit of the form. In fact, Hemingway has demonstrated how the short story, despite its smallness, can examine the existential and touch profundity.

The dramatic short story, however, with its hard outline of an event or action, is not the only style of short story. Katherine Mansfield, for instance, employs a raft of impressionistic techniques in 'Marriage à la Mode' [1921], to different ends and in so doing gives an indication of the form's versatility.

On his way to the station, William remembered with a fresh pang of disappointment that he was taking nothing down to the kiddies. Poor little chaps! It was hard lines on them. (271)

In short stories, where economy is at a premium, beginnings are key, and here Mansfield succinctly provides a hook to snag the reader's interest as she sets the story in motion and establishes the protagonist.

From the outset, it is apparent that Mansfield employs a different narrative position to Hemingway, as she shifts, with 'kiddies,' into William's idiolect, and then represents his thoughts, 'Poor little chaps!' Rather than forming a filmic piece of drama, as did Hemingway, Mansfield adopts a flexible, free indirect style which enables her narrative voice to remain distinct from the protagonist whilst capable of moving 'in and out of the character described' (Liggins 2011: 170). Using this technique, Mansfield can then reveal the character's thoughts yet still drive the external, physical action forward, 'What about fruit? William hovered before a stall just inside the station. What about a melon each?' (271). In addition, by using William as focalizer in this section of the narrative, by impressionistically 'presenting the narrative from a viewpoint...of the character's subjective experience of events' (Ferguson 1994: 220), and filtering much of the description through his sense perceptions, Mansfield grants the reader access to his judgments and character.

William glanced up and saw the hot, bright station slipping away. A red faced girl raced along by the carriages, there was something strained and almost desperate in the way she waved and called. 'Hysterical!' thought William dully. (272)

Here, William's superior, supercilious attitude manifests itself implicitly through his critical assessment of the girl, 'strained and almost desperate,' and the direct thought 'Hysterical!' Whereas Hemingway, in 'The Killers,' reveals character from the outside, Mansfield reveals character by exposing the protagonist's interiority with her psychological realism. Despite their different modes, however, both Mansfield and Hemingway sit outside the text, 'invisible...indifferent, paring his [or her] finger-nails' (Joyce 1916: 233), pushing the

reader to interpret sub-textual meaning from the dialogue, action or represented thoughts. With 'Marriage à la Mode,' as in 'The Killers,' the reader once more becomes a 'witness rather than the narrator's communicative addressee' (Jahn 2008:96).

Mansfield, however, uses her free indirect position to another purpose. Having omitted initial exposition so the narrative progresses quickly, once William is on the train she employs the free indirect style to reveal backstory through a sequence of analepses. With these mini-flashbacks Mansfield compresses the story, weaving the past into the present and succinctly delivering exposition. After recollecting how the 'new Isabel' had thrown away the children's toys 'the old donkeys and engines,' and replaced them with 'Russian toys, French toys, Serbian toys - toys from God knows where' (271), William slips into a remembered fragment:

'Well, I don't know,' said William slowly, 'When I was their age I used to go to bed hugging an old towel with a knot in it.'

The new Isabel looked at him, her eyes narrowed, her lips apart.

'Dear William! I'm sure you did!' She laughed in the new way. (271)

This shard of dramatized memory is coloured by William's reflective phraseology, 'The new Isabel' who 'laughed in her new way,' to suggest the changes he resentfully perceives. Mansfield then adds greater depth and dimension with a more recent moment soon after they had moved into their new country home, as William recalls his pleading attempt to understand the changes in Isabel, 'What is it, Isabel? What is it?' (274). Against this is layered a memory of the deeper past, when they lived in the old 'poky little house,' with its 'blue curtains and window boxes,' where Isabel spent her days looking after the children, a time when 'he hadn't the slightest idea she wasn't as happy as he was' (274).

Through these tightly-framed, non-linear fragments, Mansfield economically sketches in just enough information for the reader to infer the fracturing marriage, with William's lack of understanding mapped against the suggestion that Isabel had been unhappy fulfilling her confining role as mother. Yet all this is done minimally, the fleeting flashbacks skilfully wrapped around the 'present' of William's onward journey, so that the narrative continues to flow forward, the memories a natural part of the drama, of the character's 'present,' and of the story's 'coherent whole' (Carver in Gentry 1990: 127).

By patterning the past into the narrative 'present' with this expository analeptic sequence, Mansfield efficiently delivers the backstory, the 'earlier stages of conflict' (Ferguson 1994: 223), enabling the story to start closer to its climax. By providing glimpses into the characters' history, Mansfield not only tightens the narrative structure, making it compressed and dynamic, she also, with an economy of suggestion well-suited to the short story, shapes character depth, showing us what has brought William to this point in his 'life.' Furthermore, by embedding the fabula, Mansfield efficiently provides a context, the cracking marriage, against which the rest of the story will work.

When, in the next scene, William is met by Isabel and friends at the station, Mansfield demonstrates the short story's flexibility.

'Look here,' said William, 'how are we going to sit? I'd better get up front by the driver.'
 'No, Bobby Kane's by the driver,' said Isabel. 'You're to sit between Moira and me.' The taxi started. 'What *have* you got in those mysterious parcels?'
 'De-cap-it-ated heads!' said Bill Hunt, shuddering beneath his hat.
 'Oh, fruit!' Isabel sounded very pleased. 'Wise William! A melon and a pineapple. How too nice!' (275)

Shifting into an objective scenic method, Mansfield uses the episode to reflect William's displacement within the marriage as he is ousted from the front seat, and also to

show the fatuousness of Isabel's friends. But the scene does not end when Bobbi Kane enters the taxi and calls 'Avanti...' (275). Instead, the moment is clipped, the trail of full stops signalling a fade out, time passing. The scene then resumes in free indirect style, with William alone in the house, considering the changes to his home while Isabel is off bathing with her friends. When Isabel and friends return, Mansfield reverts to a more objective mode to show the group eating, with William 'forgotten' as Moira Morrison wonders 'what colour one's legs really were under water' (277). These telling fragments, blended by filmic cuts, are merged into one fluid, impressionistic scene that is constructed to convey both passing time and William's acute sense of alienation. Once more chronological ellipses have played a vital role in achieving the short story's necessary compression. Through omission, careful selection and tight dramatic patterning, Mansfield, like Hemingway, suggests meaning obliquely, allowing it to remain sub-textual.

Again, the final movement of 'Marriage à la Mode' demonstrates the importance of the short story's ending. Whilst William is travelling back to London on the train, not having seen the children, he decides to write Isabel a letter. The whole narrative has been structured towards this, William's moment of crisis. However, it's at this point that the narrative shifts, with variable internal focalization, to Isabel's point of view, so that the final scene and ending can deliver the story's sucker punch.

As Isabel reads the letter, '*My darling, precious Isabel. Pages and pages there were[...] What on earth had induced William...? How extraordinary it was...What could have made him...?*' (279) we witness the chasm in their relationship. After reading the letter aloud for her friends' amusement, Isabel runs into the house and up to her bedroom, filled

with remorse: 'Oh, what a loathsome thing to have done. How could she have done it?'

(280). But then her friends call for her to go 'for a bathe' (280).

Of course she would stay here and write.

'Titania!' piped Moira

'Isa-bel?'

No, it was too difficult. 'I'll- I'll go with them and write to William later. Some other time.

Later. Not now. But I shall certainly write,' thought Isabel hurriedly.

And laughing in the new way, she ran down the stairs. (280)

In 'Marriage à la Mode,' as in Hemingway's 'The Killers,' 'We can sense...we can feel narrative structure in the short story with an intensity the novel rarely permits' (Gerlach 1985: 161). Here, the tight narrative structure leads the reader to an ironic anti-climactic epiphany, a 'sudden spiritual transformation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture, or in a memorable phase of the mind itself' (Joyce 2000: xxxiv), whereupon Isabel chooses to continue with her 'new' behaviour. Isabel's attitude is revealed to be at odds with William's earlier sentiments, demonstrating how they have grown apart, how they view and value the same relationship differently. Once more, as with 'The Killers,' the story refuses narrative closure. Isabel will 'certainly write,' but 'later.' We don't know if she does; we don't know if the marriage will be mended or if it is irreparably broken. It is an open ending which again suggests a future beyond the formal limits of the text, but what that future is, we are left to speculate. By weaving past into present through a character's interiority, with a tight and purposeful narrative structure, with the use of a shifting point of view and an epiphanic though inconclusive ending, Mansfield implies the characters' altered futures, futures which will be very different after the story's end. Her short story then works metonymically, the fragment suggesting the characters' whole lives.

However, Mansfield makes her short story serve another purpose. The lack of authorial explanation and the narrative structuring, with its revelatory reversal and its open

ending, leaves the reader searching for answers. Should Isabel conform to William's will, or should she pursue her New Woman path? Is William staid, sentimental, judgemental and patriarchal, or is he devoted and hard done by? Thus, 'Marriage à la Mode' demonstrates another of the short story's great capacities. As Mansfield wrote, 'What the writer does is not so much to solve the question but to put the question' (Mansfield 1987: 320), a point with which Elizabeth Bowen concurred, viewing her own stories as 'Questions asked: many end with a shrug, a query, or to the reader, a sort of over to you' (Bowen 1974: 58). By setting her story contemporaneously, in the early 1920s during the first wave of feminism, Mansfield therefore uses her understated, cryptically inconclusive short story, this fragment from the characters' lives, to ask the readers to draw their own conclusions as to whose behaviour, whose attitude is right, William's or Isabel's.

Already we begin to see some of the form's flexibility and versatility. 'The Killers' and 'Marriage à la Mode' are very different stories, told in very different ways, and yet they both exhibit many of the traits central to the modern short story: economy, ellipsis, compression and oblique suggestion; a tight narrative structure that rises quickly to its end, and a resistance to closure. Both Hemingway and Mansfield use the short story to bring a telling moment from the characters' lives into tight focus. Each, in his/her own way, captures a slice-of-life which has a quality of 'something glimpsed from the corner of the eye, in passing' (Pritchett in Carver 1995: xiii). But the good short story can come to signify something more. With Hemingway using the dramatic short story to plumb existential depths and Mansfield using the impressionistic short story to subtly interrogate personal and social issues, each has utilized the form's capacity to explore the human condition.

Helen Simpson exploits this quality of the short story in her own distinctive way in 'Hey Yeah Right Get a Life' (2000) as she addresses a theme central to modern life. The story once more begins *in media res*, immediately introducing character, establishing situation and launching the action: 'Dorrie stood at the edge of the early morning garden and inhaled a column of chilly air' (20). Like Mansfield, Simpson employs the free indirect style in the first scene.

The only other creature apart from herself was next door's cat which sauntered the length of the fence's top[...]Of course you couldn't remain inviolate; but surely there had to be some part of yourself you could call your own[...]it couldn't all be spoken for. (20)

The free indirect style, however, is complemented by conversationally omniscient authorial intrusions: 'Nowadays, those few who continued to see Dorrie at all registered her as a gloomy, timid woman' (20), who had, in bringing up her three children, thrown 'herself on the bonfire' (21) of self-sacrificial motherhood.

With this initial static scene having efficiently outlined the story's main theme of motherhood and its effects, Simpson then shifts into the scenic method as Dorrie returns to the house and the day's action begins.

'Where's your pyjama top?' she whispered.
 'Took it off,' he whispered. 'Too itchy.'
 'It's not itchy,' she tutted[...]
 His chest was like a huge warm baroque pearl... (21)

Her scenic method is fuller than Hemingway's, with more description, physical action and simile. Indeed, as the story progresses, the scenes of whip-sharp dialogue and action are also infused with Dorrie's free indirect thoughts and omniscient authorial comment. Whilst blending aspects of Hemingway and Mansfield's techniques, Simpson renews the form with her own lyrical, witty voice, crafting an individual style that is alive, fluent and perfectly suited to deliver the story's content. The tightly structured story renders a day in

the life of Dorrie, from preparing the kids for nursery and school, then picking them up again, to going for a disastrous anniversary meal with her husband and returning home. However, the story is much more than a mere sequence of events; it is a skilful interrogation of the subject of motherhood and its effects.

To achieve this, Simpson carefully patterns narrative elements against one another, yet does this so subtly that they occur naturalistically within the story's apparently spontaneous flow of drama. Extending out from Dorrie's initial thought, 'surely there had to be some part of yourself you could call your own' (20), Simpson weaves through the story a thread expressing how Dorrie feels she has experienced a loss of self, of identity and purpose, as a consequence of becoming a mother. This comes through both dialogue, in her comment to the doctor, 'In the end you really do lose yourself. Lost' (39), and through thoughts, 'Loss of inner self, that's what it was' (54).

However, Dorrie's is not the only view Simpson presents. Against it are balanced a variety of other opinions, like Marion, at the school gates, who explains, 'I used to be in accounts[...]But I couldn't go back now, I've lost touch. Lost my nerve' (42), a sentiment that echoes and extends Dorrie's own. Then there is the doctor's view, that life is 'easier' now she's back at work, because with 'tiny children you really have to be so...selfless' (38), suggesting that the urge towards selflessness is not quite so overpowering for everyone. Added to these are the school gate discussions about Nicola Beaumont, who has four children but works full time, surviving with 'wall-to-wall nannies' (43), and Susan Gloverall who is 'hot-desking somewhere off the A3' (43), plus a discussion of the problem that for some women the cost of nursery care prohibits them from returning to work at all. To further texture the consideration of the roles inhabited by wives and mothers, there is a

conversation outside the nursery gates, when one woman expresses how she wanted to leave her husband after a huge row, but then thought, 'No, hang on a minute, I can't go. I've got three children. I've got to stay' (34).

By using woven snippets of dialogue to layer different sides of the issue, Simpson creates a textured polyphony which exposes just some of the compromises and losses affecting mothers, along with the different roles mothers fulfil. In so doing, 'Hey Yeah Right Get a Life' typifies how a good story is 'not superficial in just hitting upon one or two things,' but that writers choose 'those things for a purpose which runs clean through the story. And which sharpen it' (Pritchett 1986: 29). Here these elements are skilfully entwined to explore how some feel trapped by motherhood and marriage, how certain freedoms are dependent on financial security, whilst noting that, for each woman, each variant mother-role is accompanied by the loss of some aspect of self.

With this weave of fragmentary voices, of different points of view and attitudes which resonate against one another within the short form's confined narrative space, Simpson generates a dense, polychromatic portrait of motherhood in modern British society. Yet all this is achieved as part of the natural drama of Dorrie's day. In this sense, 'Hey Yeah Right Get a Life' demonstrates the potential of the short story, the naturalistic slice-of-life, to investigate an issue or subject in the round.

We gain a further sense of Simpson's purposeful narrative design with the ending, as Dorrie scrapes vomit from the youngest child's bedsheet into the kitchen sink and opens the kitchen window. Looking out at the garden, she experiences a realization, an epiphany, that the sense of loss she is now feeling is not 'the killer pain[...]not the terrible goodbyeforever pain' (58) of loss of self, loss of young children she felt that morning, but rather 'the feeling

in a limb that has gone numb when the blood starts to flow again[...]reviving; until after a long dormant while that limb is teeming again, tingling into life' (58). This optimism, this sense of promise, of new growth and future life is economically echoed by the imagery of the 'big trees' in the garden 'waving their wild bud-bearing branches at her' (58), a mirroring of the garden motif which begins the story. This repeated imagery forms part of the story's epiphany, drawing meaning into tighter focus, heightening effect. Dorrie is looking at the same vista with different eyes, in a different light, with a sense that something is changing in her, the slightly open ending suggesting that the losses around motherhood will only be temporary, that she will soon 'get a life' of her own again.

Again Simpson has exposed the short story's metonymic potential, this day in Dorrie's life suggesting the character's whole self-sacrificing existence. Like Mansfield, Simpson cuts 'off a fragment of reality, giving it certain limits, but in such a way that this segment acts like an explosion which fully opens up a much more ample reality' (Cortazar 1994: 246). Moreover, by presenting so many outlined versions of motherhood and its issues, she engages with concerns many women must face, interrogating a subject central to our times. By refusing to pass judgement on which role a mother should fulfil, the 'selfless' or the more self-orientated, she uses the story to pose that question to the reader. In doing so, through the seemingly simple representation of a fragment in an individual's life, by 'giving the mundane it's beautiful due' (Updike 2004: 1), Simpson extends the story's meaning to question a feminist issue central to contemporary society. In exercising the flexibility of the form, Simpson demonstrates the polyphonic, multi-valent capacity of the realist short story.

James Kelman, on the other hand, uses the short story slightly differently. In 'Man to Man' (2010) he takes the fragmentary short story and exploits its brevity to the full. In doing this, and by giving voice to a rarely represented population group, the Glaswegian working class, Kelman renews the realist short story in his own way.

Taking Mansfield's 'de-emphasis of plot, action and dramatic incident' (Hunter 2010: 43), several steps further, very little actually happens in the story. In it, a man sits at a bar, watching a couple have an argument and contemplates intervening, but he doesn't and eventually leaves the bar then thinks about going home.

The story takes the form of a digressive account by an unknown monologist, the reader becoming listener, pulled straight into the action by the interlocutory beginning.

'The guy eh – what d'ye call him, I can never remember his name. He was giving her a row right in the middle of the floor.' (101)

Again, like Hemingway and Mansfield, the story is elliptical, but more so. There is no exposition, no backstory, no context provided. We do not know who the protagonist is, only that his vernacular positions him as a working-class Glaswegian. The story is simply a moment, a fragment from a character's existence, briefly illuminating a moment in his 'life.'

With the demotic Glaswegian first person stream-of-consciousness monologue recounting a naturalistic scene, Kelman uses indirect obliquity to illuminate quotidian urban dysfunction.

How come they were letting it happen, all just standing there? No just the barstaff. Everybody. (101)

Without becoming involved in the incident, the monologist tells of how 'I felt like getting a grip of him,' speculating that the best thing to do would have been to 'just batter him with something...Fucking heavy ashtray...A chair...fucking hit him with it' (101). But that

doesn't happen. In fact no one in the bar reacts, 'Some watch or else don't watch' (102). and instead the people talk 'about the Celtic and Hearts game,' to 'make it seem like it didnay mean nothing, no anything special' (102).

Then, in a tangential bounce, the speaker considers the thoughts we all have but keep to ourselves, 'Dreams and hallucinations. I even get them when I'm sitting myself' (102). It's a free associative digression which adds to the sense of inertia, as though the speaker is distracting himself from his own apathy, going on to consider, 'ye don't want to end up a babbler' (102), like these 'poor old sods,' 'who babble away to themselves' (103) in pubs. This reference serves to emphasize the insularity of his own inaction and that of all the other men in the bar, reflecting on the way we as individuals live, trapped 'inside wur own head' (103), doing nothing.

After 'landing' his pint on the bar, the monologist pushes 'clear to the fresh air' (103). Outside, he imagines the 'Farms and fields. Aw aye. Even the way mist comes down ower the Clyde' (103). Here, Kelman juxtaposes images against one another for dramatic effect, the pub's brutality and paralysis, against a remote, peaceful rural idyll, just as thought and digression were interlarded to emphasize the urban malaise.

Finally, after listening to some young boys, 'scouting for lassies' (104), the narrator announces 'I was glad to be gon hame' (104). It is an open ending to a story in which nothing has happened, and where there has been no change for the characters.

The heart of the story, however, is not in the action, but in what it enacts: 'stasis, paralysis and inconsequence' (Hunter 2010: 49). Kelman uses the short story as a means with which to embody the modern human condition as experienced in parts of Scotland, the inability to connect, the inconsequence of existence. He deploys a 'fragmentary,

inconclusive and atomistic' (Hunter 2010: 45) short story form to highlight lived experience, to portray a class fraction that has become 'atomized, fragmented[...]isolated' (Cairns Craig in Hunter 2010: 45), as a consequence of high levels of unemployment and lack of opportunity. Thus, making art out of inaction and alienation, Kelman uses the story, metonymically, to represent his view of the immutably bleak nature of working-class and unemployed life in Glasgow.

Although Kelman's style and intention may differ from Hemingway's, Mansfield's, and Simpson's, his short story remains elliptical, oblique, and indirect. But Kelman does not use the realist short story to interrogate issues or explore the existential; instead he transforms the fleeting fragment, the inconsequential episode into a damning comment on life in post-industrial Scotland.

Already, in just four stories, we have seen a variety of styles and techniques used to diverse ends, demonstrating not only the form's flexibility and versatility, but also how it can turn the everyday into the profound. Moreover, it is a form that is always open to change and growth, indeed its constraint of brevity invites invention, challenging the writer to find new ways to represent 'life' effectively, and to make the form as expressive as possible.

Whilst James Kelman's story focuses on a slight moment to symbolize the socio-political condition of a disenfranchised Scottish class fraction, Alice Munro, with her innovative remodelling of narrative architecture, once more makes the form her own, and in so doing 'manages to condense whole lifetimes into a single story' (Cox 2005: 34), as she scans across a family history.

With a first person narrator and a conversational prose style that blends summary, particularity, reflection and dramatized moments, 'Family Furnishings' takes the form of a recollection, a writer looking back, telling her story, trying to make sense of events.

Beginning with a family anecdote about the narrator's father and his cousin, Alfrida, who 'were out in the fields playing with my father's dog' (86), when the church bells rang to signify the end of the First World War, the story then moves forward to the narrator's recollection of family life when she was young.

My family did not have a regular social life – people did not come to the house for dinner, let alone parties. It was a matter of class, maybe. (89)

Employing an elliptical, shifting time frame, Munro hops forward through the narrator's memories to when 'I won a scholarship. I didn't stay home to take care of my mother or of anything else. I went straight to college' (99-100). She then skips on again, 'At the end of my second year I was leaving college...It didn't matter – I was planning to be a writer. And I was getting married' (101).

Munro's handling of narrative time is expert, fluid, weaving the story together from shards of remembered fragments, as when the narrator went for a meal with Alfrida, who, during the dinner recalls the accident that killed her mother:

I must have thought I was a pretty big cheese, mustn't I? *'She would want to see me.'*
The story I wrote with this in it would not be written till years later. (111)

This moment contains not only Alfrida's history, but also a proleptic glimpse of how Alfrida's recollection would later be used in the narrator's writing. Again the narrative jumps ahead several years, backfilling how 'Alfrida did not come to my father's funeral,' then recalling how her father had previously said,

'Well, you know, Alfrida was a bit upset.'

[...]My father reminded me of the story, published several years ago... (113)

Deftly, Munro shows how the narrator had caused a family rift, with Alfrida having taken umbrage at the narrator's later composition. This fluid, non-sequential handling of time is discreetly enmeshed to form the story's forward movement, yet it also consistently throws light back onto previous events, illuminating them.

At the funeral, the narrator meets Alfrida's previously unmentioned illegitimate daughter, the family's long held secret. Alfrida's daughter recounts the opening anecdote, but with an altered detail, that Alfrida and the narrator's father were 'walking home from school one day...high school' (117). This then leads the narrator to question her own memory: she'd thought 'they were just children' (117), but 'It was much more likely that they were walking home from high school than they were playing on the fields...Maybe they had never said 'playing'' (118).

It is an epiphanic moment, the 'concise, subtle revelatory detail' (Holcombe 2005: 1), opening a different perspective on the family history, opening an unresolved narrative gap of who the woman's father is. Appropriately, the non-linear chronology, in combination with this revelation, is used to explore how 'Things get changed around' (118), how memories and history can be distorted, and how these distortions paper over the secrets which lie behind the 'Family Furnishings.'

And yet Munro does not end the story there. The final scene shifts back in time to a point half way along the story's fabula, to 'That Sunday after the dinner at Alfrida's' (118), when the narrator remembers dropping into a drugstore for a coffee: 'I did not think of the story I would write about Alfrida- but of the work I wanted to do, which seemed more like

grabbing something out of the air than constructing stories[...]this was how I wanted my life to be' (119).

Whilst seeming to reflect the family rifts and secrets that scatter all our lives, 'Family Furnishings' becomes a story about a young woman determining her own identity and future, about the older self-looking back and understanding how she became the person she is. By remodelling the narrative structure, using non-sequential emplotment and closed ending, Munro shapes the story to symbolize female self-determination after the restrictive social conventions and unhappy marriages of previous generations, and thus it becomes a marker in the progress towards greater female agency. Once more, Munro has renewed the realist short story so she can, through the prism of the personal, refract the issues relevant to her times.

As part of the realist short story's long tradition, Munro's 'Family Furnishings,' with its innovative structure, demonstrates how the short story is perennially evolving. Just as writers must strive to find their own voices and views of the world, so they must develop their own versions of the form in order to represent and respond to life. It is this ever increasing scope of technical and formal possibilities that ensures the short story remains flexible and versatile, and resists becoming stale and formulaic.

In examining this selection of texts, it has become evident that the modern realist short story is often an elliptical, inconclusive and metonymic form, with an economy of suggestion at its heart. Although it cannot represent the 'totality of life' (Lukacs 1971: 51) it can render a snapshot, a slice-of-life, a fragment; with it a writer can seize any aspect of existence, hold it still for a moment, and shape it for the readers' entertainment and scrutiny. And with that fragment, a writer can capture a moment in time, an episode, a

tightly focused representation of a credible reality, especially a point of change or transition in a character's 'life', which, when carefully crafted, can resonate with meaning and implication that extends beyond the limit of the text.

The art of the realist short story, therefore, is to make the fragment as expressive as possible. The short story can then not only grant readers insight into life by showing aspects of existence beyond their own experience, it can also interrogate the human condition. Indeed, we have already seen how, when technique and content combine successfully, the short story can ask questions, explore the existential, examine social issues, form political comment, investigate the nature of memory and assess the choices one makes in establishing identity. Far from being a simple, limited form, the modern realist short story is a complex art that can access profundity through the quotidian, and imbue the mundane with significant meaning. Yes, it enables the writer to 'catch any piece of life as it flies and make his [her] own personal performance out of it' (Pritchett in Current-Garcia 1974: 171), but it has a further function than simply to entertain. The realist short story can reflect life back at us and help us to see ourselves, and the world around us, more clearly, albeit one glimpse at a time.

Chapter 2

Place and the Short Story

Place plays a vital role within the realist short story. Not only is the evocation of place crucial to the creation of story-world and the crafting of verisimilitude, it is also a means by which to shade tone efficiently, and effect the compression necessary to the short story. More than this however, the evocation of place can enable the writer to achieve socio-political resonances, and thus respond to his or her society.

Through close reading, this chapter will explore the many functions of place in the short story, and how it has been utilized by several writers, beginning with Anton Chekhov's 'In the Cart' [1897]. The story concerns a village schoolteacher, Marya Vasilievna, who is on her way back home to the village having collected her wages from a nearby town.

They left town at half past eight in the morning.

The road was dry and the beautiful April sun was very warm, but there was still snow lying in the ditches and in the forest. The long, dark, mean winter was not long past, and spring had arrived suddenly, but neither the sunshine, nor the thin listless forests warmed by the breath of spring, nor the black flocks flying over enormous puddles which were like lakes in the fields, nor the glorious sky into whose boundless expanses one could have joyously disappeared seemed new or interesting to Marya Vasilievna sitting there in the cart. (125)

Immediately Chekhov establishes the story in time and space. It is half past eight on an April morning, and the characters are on a 'road' through a rural landscape of snow-filled 'ditches,' 'forests,' and waterlogged 'fields.' With this introduction, Chekhov forms the 'basic conceptual framework for the construction of the narrative world,' and thus provides the necessary 'spatio-temporal hooks on which to hang our interpretations' (Bridgeman 2007: 63). Moreover, the layering of concrete details, 'The road was dry,' 'there was still snow lying in the ditches and in the forest,' with which Chekhov begins to 'direct the

reader's visual imagination' (Bowen 1974: 179), also functions to add greater specificity to the story-world.

The third sentence details the scene further with a lyrical description, grouping 'the little particulars...in such a way that, in reading, when you shut your eyes, you get a picture' (Chekhov 1965: 86), then focuses on Marya 'sitting there in the cart' (125), which both introduces the protagonist and brings her to the narrative foreground. And yet, by constructing the sentence so that none of the details 'seemed new or interesting to Marya...', and by impressionistically filtering the description through the protagonist's perceptions, place is also used to outline Marya's attitudes, and deepen her characterization. In addition to this, when one considers the story's ensuing psychological action whereby Marya's thoughts reveal her unhappy situation, 'her life was passing by miserably' (129), the residual snow, resistant to the sun's warmth, suggests a chill undercurrent which serves to subtly foreshadow the story's emotional tone.

When, after meeting Khanov, the local landowner, 'they turned off the highway onto the road to the village, Khanov in front and Semyon [Marya's driver] following behind,' with 'Khanov's four horses...straining to drag the heavy carriage through the mud' (126), we see that each change of scene requires that place be established. This re-determining of place, together with the 'objective spatial relationship' (Bridgeman 2007: 55) between cart and carriage enables 'the readers to construct complex worlds in their minds' (Bridgeman 2007: 52).

However, the concrete details work at a deeper level. The diversion onto the muddy road also coincides with Marya's considerations that she is powerless against the corruption in the village, 'nobody listened to her' (127), and within the local school system, where 'the

school inspector...had got his job through the back door,' and 'the school's trustee...was rude, slow-witted and in cahoots with the caretaker' (127). The mud on the road, 'as thick as clay...' (128) effectively echoes the miring corruption Marya sees in the society she inhabits, and as such becomes a metaphor, a symbol for that society. Equally, the mud motif works to intensify Marya's thoughts that everything is 'so uninviting and cheerless,' and that 'Life is difficult and uninteresting' (129). Thus, the evocation of place is here working in conjunction with psychological and physical action to help shape the story's tone, enrich characterization, and economically intensify meaning, whilst also contributing to the 'whole successful unity of the story' (Hills 2000: 156). As Elizabeth Bowen noted, 'Nothing happens nowhere. The locale of the happening always colours the happening and often, to a degree, shapes it' (Bowen 1974: 177).

Examining 'In the Cart' further, it becomes clear how place, the locale, is also central to the shaping of the story. When Marya and Semyon arrive at the inn, Chekhov again describes the scene concisely, objectively, without unnecessary lexical flourish.

Near the inn, on ground strewn with manure underneath which there was still snow, stood carts which had been transporting large drums of oil of vitriol. (130)

This frost-bitten feculence contributes to the story's grim atmosphere, which then extends inside the building; a place smelling of 'vodka, tobacco and sheepskin,' inhabited by a crowd of people, 'all drivers.' An accordion is playing, and at the table beside Marya's 'some peasants were drinking vodka and beer' (130).

It is a naturalistic scene, mimetically representing the hard-bitten peasantry of the Russian Steppe in 1897; a portrayal of a place and the people living in it. When someone utters a 'string of curses' (130) and old Semyon shouts at him, it is evident that this is no

rural idyll of 'smocked innocence' (Williams 1975: 203), but a harsh, drunken world. In his delineation of the rough peasantry, together with the village teacher with her 'poor pay' (Bruford 1947: 60) and Kahnov the landowner, an educated, refined man, 'gradually drinking himself to death' (Bruford 1947: 86), Chekhov presents a true to life snapshot of the isolated, degraded and stratified rural society of that region at that time.

This unrefined world, which has entirely shaped Marya's present life, is accentuated when, after crossing the river, she pauses at the station. Staring at the train, a shining symbol of modernity in a muddy rustic setting, a memory is triggered and she thinks she sees her long-dead mother. She recalls her youth, 'the apartment in Moscow,' 'the aquarium with the little fish,' 'the sound of the piano being played' (132), and 'she felt as if she was pretty, young and well-dressed in a bright, warm room' (133). Notably, the reverie transports her beyond the 'container' (Bridgeman 2007:55) of her present, back to her family home, to a place and time when she was happy. Moscow, in her memory, with its connotation of the 'civilizing city' (Williams 1975: 290), is all that her rural Steppe present is not; it is 'bright, warm,' sophisticated and cultured. For Marya, it embodies a better existence which, when compared with her present, heightens the rural world's shortcomings and her sense of not belonging there. It is a present to which she returns as the analepsis dissolves. She climbs back into the cart and, 'numb with cold' (133), crosses the tracks back to the village towards the inconclusive 'zero ending' (Loehlin 2010: 48) which promises her unrelenting misery. In this instance therefore, place, by juxtaposition, is used to highlight Marya's plight, how far she has fallen, as well as to shape the implicit suggestion that her life is inescapable.

Even in this relatively compact short story, the function of place is hugely varied. Not only does it provide one of the primary components of the 'basic conceptual framework for the construction of the narrative world' (Bridgeman 2007: 63), not only does it provide the site for the contrast and conflict (physical or psychological) necessary for any story, but its description has been used to direct the reader's visual imagination, to generate tone and intensify meaning. Moreover, by impressionistically filtering description of place through a character's perceptions, by using concrete detail to trigger analepsis and psychological action, it becomes a component in the creation of sub-textual meaning. Furthermore, by showing how characters live within a realistic setting or location, it is possible to form the short story into a slice-of-life glimpse, a snapshot of a particular society at a particular moment in time, in this case the Russian Steppe in 1897, and the injustices, corruptions and the sense of hopelessness therein.

Whereas Chekhov has given us the lives in the rural landscape of the Russian Steppe, James Joyce's 'Two Gallants' [1914] from his *Dubliners* collection depicts the urban setting of the titular city, Dublin, and uses place for another purpose.

In the story, two youngish men wander the streets of Dublin. One, Corley, in the spirit of sexual conquest, meets a young 'slavey' (domestic servant) with whom he then catches the tram to Donnybrook; the other, Lenehan, awaiting their return, enters a 'Refreshments Bar' and eats a plate of peas, then walks the streets again. When Corley and the slavey return, the slavey retreats into her employer's house and re-emerges to present Corley, her 'gallant,' with a small gold coin.

Like Chekhov, Joyce begins with a framing paragraph which outlines the scene and situates the story in place and time.

The grey warm evening of August had descended upon the city and a mild warm air, a memory of summer, circulated in the streets. The streets, shuttered for the repose of Sunday, swarmed with a gaily coloured crowd. Like illumined pearls the lamps shone from the summits of their tall poles upon the living texture below... (36)

Not only does Joyce position the story in the 'city' of the collection's title, but he also informs the reader that it is a 'grey warm evening of August' and a 'Sunday.' By means of the descriptive detail of 'shuttered' streets filled with 'a gaily coloured crowd,' he reveals the social customs of Dublin at the time of composition (1907) and publication (1914), when shops and pubs were closed on a Sunday and people gathered in the public spaces. With the extract's final sentence, he adds specificity of detail which vivifies the scene further. In three lyrical but precise sentences, with an economy ideally suited to the short story, Joyce efficiently frames the narrative in time and place, evoking the vibrant late summer evening atmosphere of 1907 Dublin whilst shaping the nature of the place and how the people live there.

With 'Two young men came down the hill of Rutland Square,' Joyce focuses the narrative lens on the titular characters and locates them on a real street, using the actual street name. Then, with close observation, such as Lenehan being, 'squat and ruddy,' with 'A yachting cap' 'shoved back from his forehead' (36), the characters are brought into relief against the backdrop and from the crowds. The positioning of these protagonists in a real place, together with credible characterization and bawdy dialogue, 'fine tart' (37), 'She was...a bit of all right...' and 'There was others at her before me...' (39) all combine to create the urban environment and an earthy verisimilitude. This realism is reaffirmed by Joyce's topographical accuracy as he 'insists on noticing where and how people traverse the city' (Pierce 2008: 118), which goes some way to showing how those people live. Within this

framework there is constant motion as the Two Gallants, the flâneurs, move around the city streets. Yet the characters themselves do not acknowledge their surroundings.

As they passed along the railings of Trinity College, Lenehan skipped out into the road and peered up at the clock.
-Twenty after, he said. (39)

According to David Pierce, 'They make nothing of the city's remarkable buildings or historical institutions' (Pierce 2008: 122). Instead they engage with them at a functional level, with Lenehan checking the time, concerned that Corley will miss his rendezvous. For the gallants, the city is just there. Similarly, when they walk past 'the harpist' on 'Kildare Street' (39-40) they do not pause or comment on the scene, they merely 'walked up the street without speaking' (40). And yet Joyce takes the time to paint this scene with deliberate intent.

At surface level, the harpist is simply a concrete detail which evokes place and the atmosphere of the street scene, creating the realism of what Joyce called the 'Irish landscape' of Dublin, with its 'Sunday crowds and the harp on Kildare Street and Lenehan' (Joyce 1957: 64). But beneath the surface detail lurks a complex symbolism. If we consider that the harp 'represents Ireland herself' (Johnson 2000: xx), a fact which would be familiar to Irish people then and now, and 'His harp too, heedless that her coverings had fallen about her knees, seemed weary alike of the eyes of strangers and of her master's hands' (40), we are alerted to metaphor at play.

Through poignant personification, the harp signifies Ireland's abuse and subjugation at the hands of the British, and its 'lack of political independence' (Litz 1969: 68) in 1907. This symbol is then intensified and irony created by situating the scene 'not far from the steps of the club...' on 'Kildare Street' (39), which was 'long the haven of Unionism in

Ireland' (Torchiana 1986: 93), and where the Protestant political elite, the 'strangers' and 'masters' congregated whilst the Irish remained shut outside. The historical and political significance of place is then emphasized as the gallants walk along 'Nassau Street,' 'Grafton Street' and 'Capel Street' which bear 'the names of those who..... not only oppressed Ireland, but were rewarded for doing so' (Johnson 2000: xix). Mention of Rutland Square, where the gallants begin the story, and where the headquarters of the Protestant Orange Order was situated, is similarly relevant. Thus, by describing Corley and Lenehan's route with topographical accuracy, and by using real street names, Joyce exploits the local and national history held latent within place to create political context.

As the story progresses, Lenehan and Corley are depicted as scroungers, parasites exploiting their society. When this is considered within the political context defined by the harp symbol, together with the street names, the implicit, unstated suggestion is that Lenehan and Corley's amorality, their circumscribed lives, are a consequence of British rule and Catholic suppression. The place in which they live has affected their lives, and as a result, their actions and behaviour make manifest the 'political frustration, economic degradation and spiritual paralysis' (Litz 1969: 65) in Ireland at that time. This can also be said of the rough, suspicious 'under-class' (Litz 1969: 66) in the 'Refreshment Bar,' (42) who, we can assume, have been similarly determined by the same socio-political conditions.

Whilst these are lives which evoke certain strata of Dublin society and a sense of Dublin itself, they are also the characters who along with their conflicts bring the fictive place to life on the page. Without the people, Joyce's Dublin would be mere empty buildings and vacant streets. It is as true in reality as it is in fictional story-worlds that people are as

representative of a place as are the streets and buildings; the lives of people and the places where they live are inextricably linked.

So we see that Joyce has evoked place on a series of levels. First and foremost, the concrete details Joyce presents are simply concrete details which construct the story world and position the characters therein. By being explicitly topographical and locating the fictional action on the 'real' streets of Dublin, Joyce conjures a realistic setting. By situating credible characters engaged in credible action in a 'real' setting, the sense of verisimilitude is increased. However, nothing in the story's setting, its evocation of place, is mere background. Like the harp outside the club, objects are both concrete and symbolic. By patterning the symbols against the latent history of Ireland held immanent within place and place names, Joyce manufactures a meaningful political comment on the colonial subjugation of Ireland. When the characters' lives, Corley's exploitation of the slavey, and Lenehan's scrounging, are layered against this context, Joyce extends the meaning to show the effects, at a level of individual behaviour, character and morality, of the socio-political situation on those who live in Dublin and, more broadly, Ireland.

By setting the story in a richly evoked place, Dublin, at a certain moment in time, Joyce has created a socio-political context for the story. The confluence of character and action within the context of that place then enables Joyce, through the personal, to extend political meaning and comment. Although this deeper level of implication remains sub-textual, the interplay of character, action and place has enabled the compressed construction of significant meaning in a form where economy is at such a premium.

Both Chekhov and Joyce show characters moving through public spaces for particular effects. Whereas Chekhov uses the countryside to access the personal and the

social, Joyce uses the city and its topography to access the political and its impact on private lives. Setting, however, can be much more confined and still provide a meaningful narrative container. In Hemingway's modernist, minimalist short story, 'Hills like White Elephants' [1927a], the scene and the action are static, occurring at a rural railway station in Spain, yet place plays a vital role in the construction of the story's meaning.

The story revolves around the dialogue between an American man and a woman as they sit at a table and drink their beers and Anis del Toro. The man is trying to convince the girl to do 'it,' to have an 'awfully simple operation' (Hemingway 2004: 260). The 'it' is never specified, though it has been assumed, by many readers and critics, to be an abortion. Whilst the man wants the woman to have the abortion, she seems more inclined to keep the child. And yet the issue between them is never explicitly stated. The characters' dialogue is clipped and circumlocutory, their physical reactions omitted, leaving the reader to infer meaning. As Hemingway once stated, a writer 'may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have the feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them' (Hemingway 1994: 192). Hemingway's Iceberg Theory² relies on the careful construction of meaning, and in 'Hills like White Elephants,' place is a crucial component in this building process.

From the outset, Hemingway is precise about the setting.

The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white. On this side there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun. Close against the side of the station there was the warm shadow of the building and a curtain, made of strings of

² With his Iceberg Theory, 'The dignity of movement of the iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water' (Hemingway 1994: 192), Hemingway suggested that only the tip of the iceberg should show in fiction, with the reader seeing only what's above the narrative waterline. The knowledge the writer has about character and prior events which he/she suppresses then acts as the submerged bulk of the iceberg, giving the story depth and opening implication. 'You could omit anything if you knew what you omitted, and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood,' (Hemingway quoted in Meyers 1985: 114).

bamboo beads, hung across the open door into the bar, to keep out flies. The American and the girl with him sat at a table in the shade, outside the building. It was very hot and the express from Barcelona would come in forty minutes. It stopped at this junction for two minutes and went on to Madrid. (259)

Linguistically and syntactically, the opening is far simpler and more minimal than Joyce or Chekhov, and yet this does not make it any less effective. It is filmic with initial shots establishing the location, then leading us into the scene by zooming in from the panorama of the 'hills,' down to the closely observed 'curtain made of strings of bamboo beads,' until finally the characters are delineated. Whilst the visual image is set with concrete detail, Hemingway also constructs a precise framework within which the action occurs, and at a metaphorical level, uses place to encapsulate the very essence of the story. The couple, at a station waiting for a train, are at a point of hiatus in their lives, caught between their past and their future, figured through the 'two lines of rails' which lead back to Barcelona and 'on to' Madrid.

As the woman in the bar delivers their drinks, 'The girl was looking off at the line of white hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry' (Hemingway 2004: 259). She looks at them again shortly before the man initiates the discussion with, 'It's really an awfully simple operation...' (260). Then, after arguing round the point, the girl stands and walks, 'to the other end of the station. Across on the other side were fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro...she saw the river through the trees' (262). The binary vistas of the hillside's barren aridity, 'brown and dry' and the fertile valley, embody the decision she has to make: abortion or not. In every sense, they are at a junction in their lives, and whichever direction the woman chooses to take, the couple's future will change forever.

Hemingway, like Chekhov and Joyce, is making 'the concrete work double time' (O'Connor 1969: 98). The station is not merely a container for the action, a site for conflict; the landscape is not merely a backdrop. Instead they function to outline the situation, to embody the woman's inner conflict, her choice. In this, place becomes a component in Hemingway's narrative compression, subtly providing the explanation of problem he purposefully omits. But more than this, it is a component by which he extends the story's meaning; the 'simple details in Hemingway's seemingly realistic short story become transformed into embodiments of complex human conflict,' expressing, metaphorically, that which is 'basically incommunicable' (May 1995: 66).

When the woman returns to the table and the man begins again, '...you know it's perfectly simple' (262), and she pleads, 'Would you please please please please please please please stop talking?' (263) we understand the difficulty of her choice as well as her inexpressible frustration. Here the dialogue and place have coalesced to form an Objective Correlative, a key technique in the compressed form of the realist short story, focusing entirely on 'showing, not telling.' As T. S. Eliot wrote, 'The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked' (Eliot 1921: 2).

Place is ultimately used to demonstrate the man's attitudes to the woman's behaviour, when, after carrying the bags round to the platform, he looks at the people in the bar, 'waiting reasonably for the train' (263). By loading the description with the adverb

'reasonably,' Hemingway, suggests, with true Hemingwayesque misogyny, that the woman is acting unreasonably by not wanting to have the abortion.

And yet very little is directly expressed. Instead, with his deft use of place, Hemingway takes us deep into the psychological action of the characters, and illuminates the profoundly personal without once exposing their respective interiority.

Already we have seen how the use of place is at the heart of the modern short story, in establishing the narrative world and directing the reader's visual imagination, in generating tone and verisimilitude, in compressing the narrative as well as extending its meaning. Raymond Carver's 'Dirty Realist' (Buford 1983: 4) minimalism continues this trend, indeed it is even leaner and more austere than Hemingway's. In fact, the stripped-to-the-bone style of his early stories led some to observe that his writing had 'barely the elements of realism' (Ford 1998: 72). However his stories still manage to capture the human condition of 1970s and 80s America, rendering an 'accurate representation of[...]contemporary life, without embellishment, abstraction or idealization' (Rebein 2012: 31). To achieve this he makes use of place in similar ways to Chekhov, Joyce and Hemingway before him. Indeed, because his style is so stark, he makes detail and place work even harder. His story, 'A Serious Talk' [1981] is a case in point.

In this story, Burt, the protagonist, a man separated from his wife and children, arrives back at the family home on Boxing Day morning. He parks his car on the driveway.

Vera's car was there, no others, Burt gave thanks for that. He pulled into the drive and stopped beside the pie he'd dropped the night before. It was still there, the aluminium pan upside down, a halo of pumpkin filling on the pavement. It was the day after Christmas. (89)

In his spare, concise style, Carver instantly sets the story in motion. He does not begin with a descriptive pause, as did Chekhov, Joyce and Hemingway, rather, he wraps

detail around the action of the *in media res* beginning, 'He pulled into the drive and stopped beside the pie he'd dropped the night before'. There is no description of the house or driveway; Carver relies on the reader's familiarity with such settings to shorthand his descriptions. Instead, he focuses on the particular and telling detail of the spilled pie; its presence not only alerting the reader to the fact that this is not necessarily a normal situation, but also metaphorically presaging the story's portrayal of the overturned family. Furthermore, it provides the trigger for the analeptic episode which reveals how the pie came to be there on the drive. Thus, though the description of place is minimal, the detail given is multi-valent in meaning, and serves a variety of functions.

Similarly, the image of a 'wreath on the patio door' (70) carries nuanced implications. Given the time of year, one might assume that it is a festive decoration, but because Carver is non-specific, the wreath can also signify the death of, and the mourning for, the couple's marriage.

Once in the house, Burt 'looked around. The tree blinked on and off...A turkey carcass sat on a platter in the centre of the dining-room table, the leathery remains in a bed of parsley as if in a horrible nest' (91). In this context, the 'leathery remains' of the turkey and the picked-bare carcass is a metaphor for their marriage, their family, stripped to the bone by his dysfunction. The mere mention of a blinking tree, a turkey and a dining-room table suggests that it is Christmas and this is a home, albeit a 'horrible nest', where festive details conflict with the unhappy exchange between man and wife as she accuses him of trying 'to burn the house down' (91), and he needles her about her boyfriend.

Without describing the house in detail, the lay-out of the rooms, the furniture, the colour of the walls, Carver is still able to convey a sense of 'his house, his home' (90), a

shared domestic space. To achieve this, he employs an accretion of images like the bicycle in the garden 'without a front wheel standing upside down,' and the 'weeds growing along the redwood fence' (91). As well as 'directing the reader's imagination' (Bowen 1974: 179), as well as framing a typically suburban image of familial life, these also reflect the decay and disintegration of Burt and Vera's marriage, the absolute breakdown in communication, the broken nature of the family home; a home from which he has been excluded, like the missing wheel.

Every element of the evocation of place is serving the story's central focus, developing subtextual meaning. The details of recent activity are proof that life has continued without him. Here Carver utilizes the concept of home, and its implied connotations of togetherness, peace and security, to show how the Burt character, with his destructive behaviour, is working against all of these. After all, his drinking vodka on Boxing Day morning hardly seems conducive to familial stability or the healing of rifts. Thus, Carver's seemingly simple writing technique is in fact highly stylized, highly crafted. His rendering of place, though minimal, is vital to the meaning; the actions working in contrast to the expectations implicitly held in the notions of home and Christmas. While Madison Smartt Bell criticized Carver's minimalist style for its 'obsessive concern with surface details' (Bell 1986: 65), it is evident that these surface details are working at a far deeper, more complex level.

This is brought into sharper definition after Burt cuts the phone line whilst Vera is talking to her boyfriend. When she returns and screams at him to get out, he picks up a large ashtray 'they'd bought from a bearded potter on the mall' (93), and leaves. The thing he takes is a shared item, freighted with meaning for them, bought, presumably at a happier time. A symbol of their former life together, it effectively becomes salvage for Burt,

something saved from the sinking vessel of their marriage, a memento to cling to. And it is this surface detail which opens up the depth of emotional resonance within the story as it suggests that there is anger and grief being acted out, that Burt is mourning, his destructive tendencies being an extension of this. For him, things weren't over, he hadn't let go, 'There were things that needed talking about,' when in reality, there was nothing of meaning left to say. Throughout the story Carver remains seemingly on the surface, describing the objects of their home, and the characters' relationships and interactions with them, to 'display a complex and nuanced handling of human character' (Rebein 2012: 36).

Every place has its connotations, its immanent meanings, and every writer has the ability to use these for his own ends, to subvert the reader's expectations of that concept, or to set the scene by utilizing the archetype. By setting 'A Serious Talk' in the home, Carver has worked against our expectations of family unity and shown us a dissipated, self-destructing man, a broken marriage, a fractured family and a broken home. He shows us, in true 'Dirty Realist' style, the negative image of the suburban idyll, with the nuclear family in meltdown.

Although the story doesn't specify geographical location, the collection to which it belongs makes reference to the stories being located in or around the town of Yakima (pp 24, 54, 76) in the Pacific Northwest region, on the border between the state of Washington and Oregon. These are not tales of the city, New York or Los Angeles. There is nothing sophisticated about the lives represented. 'A Serious Talk,' like the other stories in the collection, is a depiction of blue collar lives in the post-industrialist period, during which blue collar, unskilled workers became less valued and there was increased unemployment, poverty and urban blight. By writing a realist story, set in a realistic place, positioning his

characters in a specific milieu, set contemporaneously, Carver accesses all these socio-political undertows. And by showing us the 'stalled and dispirited of the West' (Lohafer 2012: 76) he kicks at any remaining myths of idyllic American life, the American dream and Reaganite optimism and replaces the 'stereotype...with a more informed, concrete and accurate representation' (Rebein 2012: 36), of the world he knows.

Place, then is a vastly flexible weapon in the writer's arsenal and can be deployed to many ends. By situating the story and characters in a real place, contemporaneously, the writer is able to render a glimpse of modernity, with public or private spaces being employed to access anything along the continuum between the personal and the political. Always the writer must choose the setting appropriate to the story, and choose how to evoke place in the best way, be it topographical, lyrical or minimalist, whether detail is merely concrete or functions at a symbolic level, or any method along the curve of possibilities to achieve the desired effect.

Topographical writing, for example, need not be as complex as Joyce's in 'Two Gallants,' whereby he set metaphorical images against the sedimented layers of history held within place and place names to attain political meanings. Will Self, for instance, uses topographical writing to different ends in his 'North London Book of the Dead' (1991). Again, like Joyce, he situates his story in the real world, in London, where a grieving son discovers that 'not only is his dead mother residing in a flat in Crouch End, but that whole communities of dead people are inhabiting unfashionable parts of the city, running "dead businesses" or intermingling with the living' (March-Russell 2009: 161). Self names real places, with the protagonist walking past 'Ally Pally' or setting off towards 'Stroud Green Road' (13), and the dead residing in 'Winchmore Hill and Kenton' (12). By using telling

particulars, like the flat where his mother currently 'lives' being in a 'high-gabled Victorian house,' 'tiled red,' on one of 'those hilltop streets in Suburban London' (7), by situating the absurd in the recognisably real, Self can pass a social comment on suburban, middle-class banality, and angle his satire at life in the city and at London itself: 'It just goes to show you how big and anonymous the city really is' (12).

Although Self's is a somewhat broad comment about the anonymous nature of modern London and city life, different writers can use the same place to investigate different facets of existence. If we examine Helen Simpson's 'Burns and the Bankers' (2000) it becomes evident that the same place can be used to explore a vast variety of themes and subject matter.

Simpson employs real place names to establish the affluent social milieu of the story's action. This revolves around Nicola Beaumont, a lawyer, who attends a bankers' Burns' Night meal accompanied by her banker husband. With the meal occurring at a 'Park Lane' hotel, and Nicola, having just come from work at 'Ludgate Hill' (73), Simpson situates the diners, all highly successful people, in a setting of appropriate wealth. And yet throughout the prolonged meal scene, amidst a thickening alcohol haze and the 'prosperous hum' (73) of drunken discussions, Nicola, as a mother, is considering her decision to pursue her career, to send her children to the best schools, 'to keep the show on the road,' 'with the mortgage' (94) and the nanny. Set against this is the fact that 'She hadn't managed a full half hour with the children this morning[...]but it made her a bit sick considering she was out again for the second time this week and it was only Wednesday' (78-9). In this way, Simpson conjures an affluent setting filled with the wealthy to question what the successful careerist

mother loses in her relationship with her children by pursuing professional ambitions, and thus creates a dissonance between place and mental action.

Similarly, in the story 'Hey Yeah Right Get a Life' (2000), Simpson again uses the London location, this time to comment on the loss of identity a mother can experience by staying at home to bring up children. In using London to examine these themes of identity and motherhood, which have become more relevant as society has progressed and the lives of women have become less restrictive, Simpson's verisimilar short stories capture snapshots reflective of current issues in an ever changing modernity.

As Self and Simpson show, however, two short stories set in the one place can explore very different themes and examine diverse contemporaneous topics. Even so, their stories are set in an essentially middle-class world. It is possible, however, for one place to be used in the representation of lives from across the spectrum of social class, with its myriad divergent voices. If we take just two of the many writers who have written stories set in New York, we see the potential scope of those voices in the city.

Throughout the 50s and 60s both John Cheever and Bernard Malamud wrote again and again about New York, viewing the same city through their own lenses, focusing on disparate communities and matters relevant to them. Cheever returned many times to the then new suburban world of commuter trains and cocktail parties in the upper-middle-class banlieue of 'Shady Hill.' With stories like 'The Housebreaker of Shady Hill' [1958], he both satirized the values, mores and shallow morality of the well-to-do suburbanites whilst endorsing the affluent, comfortable normalcy which that life provided. 'The Five-Forty-Eight' however, is perhaps Cheever's most critical assessment of the male chauvinist, entrepreneurial values of exploitation inherent in that society. Whilst Cheever captured and

gently questioned the changing, increasingly affluent US society of the 50s and 60s, Bernard Malamud peopled his New York, the Lower East Side in particular, with ‘a panoply of immigrant voices – the residue of Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian accented’ (Aarons 2012: 133) people, as he told of the Jewish immigrant experience, of ‘little men’ struggling to survive and failing, as in ‘The Cost of Living’ [1949], of people working hard for little in ‘The Loan’ [1952], and of people seeking love, ‘The Magic Barrel’ [1958] and so on. In so doing, Malamud captured a slice of New York’s multicultural diversity, and by telling the stories of Jewish immigrants, he gave voice to ‘submerged population groups’ (O’Connor 1963: 18).³

By merely glancing at Cheever and Malamud, we begin to see that different writers can explore diverse aspects of the protean city, and that within the one place there are many socio-economic levels, many types of people, many kinds of lives, many values, and an almost infinite number of stories to tell. To different social strata, to different individuals, the city has different meanings. Through the effective evocation of place and the people there, the short story enables writers to relate these varying realities from a multiplicity of angles.

All the writers discussed, in their differing ways, present readers with snapshots of characters and their lives at specific times, in specific places, whether that’s a city, town or village, Russia, Ireland, America or Britain. Each snapshot captures some aspect of life in that place, at that time, be it personal, social, political, existential, moral, familial or whatever. In this, the verisimilar short story, with a strong evocation of place and the

³ In *The Lonely Voice*, Frank O’Connor opines that, unlike the novel, the short story does not encourage identification between reader and character, and has never had a hero. Instead, he suggests that, in the sort story, there is always a ‘sense of the outlawed figure wandering about the fringes of society’ (17-18) ‘remote from community,’ and that there is an ‘intense awareness of human loneliness’ (19). For O’Connor, this confluence of factors means the short story is ideally suited to the portrayal of outsiders and ‘submerged population groups’ (18).

society therein, enables the writer to capture effervescent moments and moods in the continuous flux of the present. Each story, in some way, holds up a 'nicely-polished looking glass' (Joyce 1966: 66), reflecting slices of life in the 'changing historical realities' (Williams 1975: 289) of those specific places. Indeed, the persistence of the realist short story, with its roots firmly established in place, continues to capture the changing landscape and the changing lives of modernity as it has done since Chekhov and Joyce's day.

We can see that the tradition is still alive today when we look at Jon McGregor's 'We Were Just Driving Around' (2013). In this story, McGregor captures some of the freedoms and the greater mobility of modernity, as a group of teenagers drive along the country roads around 'North Ormsby,' discussing the driver, Josh's plan to make and sell 'hand-made snacks' (52) from 'locally-sourced' (54) produce. On a narrative level, the individual's greater freedom is figured through the narrator's first person voice. The recognisably rural scenery becomes part of the vernacular account, with 'a farmhouse over on the right, three or four fields away, and then another one a bit further off, the other side of the river' (53), rather than being omnisciently described. Yet amidst landscape which Chekhov or Hemingway could have depicted, there were 'the red lights of some television mast or something' (53), a beacon of modernity rising from the pastoral, a reminder of progress and the connecting nature of technology. Progress is being evidenced through material changes without the need for authorial comment. Whilst the car demonstrates the greater mobility and freedoms people now enjoy, the TV mast acknowledges that progress is occurring even in remote areas, and that, like the foodstuffs Josh lists, 'pretzels and Bombay mix and popcorn' (53), 'Much of what was once special about the city is now found virtually everywhere' (Zenner 2010: 184). Rural lives are no longer as isolated or as static as they

were in Chekhov's time, and this onward flow of progress, or decline, is encapsulated in personalized fragments within the short story.

Julian Barnes's 'East Wind' (2011) acknowledges human movement over greater distances, and place is used to inflect meaning from the very beginning. Vernon, the protagonist, an estate agent, has moved, after divorce, from London to a coastal town near Colchester. The provincial coastal town is a place on the margins, on the border between land and sea, a suitable setting for a man marginalized from his family. And yet it is also loaded with the sense of retreat from city life to the 'bored sky' and 'lifeless sea' (3) which matches his desire to 'have no weather in his life' (3). Bookending the story is the mention of an absent 'row of beach huts' which 'had been burned to the ground' (3). As he sits in a sea front café looking out, Vernon's thoughts that 'their disappearance improved the view,' speaks of his own indifference as an outsider as well as recognizing the altered landscape. It is a landscape which is both social and physical.

Whilst staring out past the missing beach huts, he notices the waitress's accent; 'Must be one of those Eastern Europeans who are all over the country' (4). When he next visits the café, his thoughts return to the subject; 'there was some town in Lincolnshire which was suddenly half Polish there has been so many immigrants...Actually he liked the Poles he had met – bricklayers, plasterers, electricians. Good workers...trustworthy. It was time the good old British building trade had a kick up the arse, Vernon thought.' (4). By connecting the burned down beach huts with Vernon's thoughts about 'immigrants,' Barnes's evocation of place reflects the changing social landscape; changes which Vernon views as a good thing.

Like McGregor, Barnes's narrative is infused with evidence of greater freedom of movement and opportunity, rendering an increasingly globalized world through the provincial town. In a similar way to Joyce, Barnes uses the local to approach national issues. Thus, both Barnes and McGregor, like Chekhov, Joyce, Carver, Simpson, Cheever, Malamud and countless others, through their evocation of place and society, form snapshots of the societies in which they live, capturing moments in the 'changing historical realities' (Williams 1975: 289) of their respective cultures.

In this chapter, therefore, we have seen how place plays a vital role in the realist short story. Not only does the evocation of place generate the story-world and add verisimilitude, it can also be used to shade tone, to compress narratives, to achieve the deft economy a short story requires, and shape sub-textual meaning. Yet more than this, we have seen how several writers, from Chekhov to Barnes and McGregor, have used the realist short story, with a strong evocation of place, to capture tightly-framed snapshots in the 'changing historical realities' (Williams 1975: 289) of the societies they portray. Moreover, we have seen how, by setting the short story within a defined place, at a particular time, the writer can access an implicit socio-political context against which his/her narrative can work. By depicting the characters' lives within a socio-political context intrinsic to the place evoked, the writer is then able to overreach the short story's restrictive narrative limit and build a socio-political response to the society which he or she portrays.

Chapter 3

Politics and the Short Story

Although the short story, due to its brevity, can only show us one or two facets of life at a time, its limitation can become its strength, the compressed narrative bringing topics into tight focus. By mining one moment or aspect of life at a time, and tightly crafting that small human drama, the writer can make the short story not only reflect life, but also refract bandwidths of socio-political meaning.

This position opposes the general critical orthodoxy surrounding the modern short story as expressed by academic Charles E. May. May refuses to accept that the short story can be 'a container for socially significant content' (May 2015: 1), and suggests that 'the short story has never had a political agenda, has never[...]succeeded[...]in[...] emphasizing social content rather than aesthetic form' (May 2015: 2). Instead, he suggests that the short story is a spiritual form, capable of exploring only the 'mysterious and ambiguous' nature of 'human reality'. (May 2011: 2) Indeed he suggests the short story should be viewed solely through the lens of its 'linguistic intricacy' and 'thematic ambiguity,' insisting that 'background context' cannot 'help someone understand how and what stories mean' (May 2011: 3).

In this dissertation, however, chapter one and two have already explored how the form, in conjunction with the socio-political context provided by the setting evoked can allow the writer to imbue the short story with 'socially significant content' (May 2015: 1). Through a discussion of several texts, this chapter will now demonstrate how writers, utilizing the contexts held immanent within setting, have consistently used the short story

to interrogate and respond to the social and political issues inherent within their respective societies.

Often the political content of a story can be so subtle, so submerged, that it is barely noticeable. Raymond Carver, with his 'A Serious Talk' [1981], uses the domestic space of home to show an individual life and a family in chaos. Using a third person narrative voice, which is closely connected to the perceptions of Burt, the protagonist, Carver shows the reader what Burt sees, and uses these visual details to convey his thoughts and feelings. It is a dramatic piece, figuring a slice-of-life through stripped-back scenic method and narrated action. It presents the hard outlines of the event to form a compellingly human story, enacting personal issues within a private space: a man's alcoholic dysfunction, his dissolving marriage, a fracturing family. It is a story of dislocation and disempowerment, of a man fighting to be heard by his wife, but when he gets the chance, he has nothing to say.

The story captures 'otherwise "unnoticeable people"' (Rebein 2012: 35), focusing on mundane lives, lived amongst a plethora of mundane objects. Consistently, Carver draws our attention to the material details in the house, concrete details which, as well as evoking place also function as significant evidence of America's consumer culture: the torn wrapping paper from Christmas presents, the picked-clean turkey carcass, the blinking Christmas tree lights, the upturned bicycle in the yard. As well as providing the domestic backdrop, these details become symbols of the American dream in everyday life, proof of consumption as freedom, of material plenty. Set in one of the world's wealthier countries, with its celluloid projection of power and success, Carver shows us, in contrast, the collapsing existences of ordinary, unfulfilled people whose best hope, often, is simply to survive. He presents us with lives that blow as litter amongst the discarded detritus of mass-culture consumerist

America. Instead of perpetuating the myth of the American dream, 'the ideal that life will get better, that progress is inevitable if we obey the rules and work hard, that material prosperity is assured' (Hedges 2012: 226-7), Carver uses his 'Dirty Realism' (Buford 1983: 4) to tell the truths about life and experience as he knows it. He bears witness. And it is by bearing witness to America's grim underbelly, by exposing the bitter truth beneath the glossy lie, that Carver's story works to subvert the myth of the American dream, and in so doing, becomes a socio-political act.

Where a short story functions as a political act, less is more, and it is the story's simplicity, its confluence of character, action, structure, place and time, rather than authorial assertion, which opens up the depth of implication. As Frederick Barthelme said, 'As a writer...you can't "philosophize" in that too easy way that comes perhaps too easily to literary types, you have to side-step the made-simple versions of political and moral issues...you've got to use the language carefully, so that you get more than just language' (Barthelme 1988: 27).

A more direct critique of American culture, though from a different angle, comes in John Cheever's 'The Five-Forty-Eight' [1954]. Rather than examining the life of someone from whom the American dream has slipped away, Cheever portrays an episode in the life of a man firmly ensconced within the burgeoning middle classes of 1950s and 60s America, a class which was living the American dream.

Blake, the story's protagonist, is a business executive, one of the new commuter class, a faceless, 'insignificant man' (238) heading home from work, catching the train to Shady Hill amongst the other commuters, many of them neighbours to whom he no longer speaks after previous quarrels. On the way, he is followed by a vulnerable, mentally-ill

former employee, a secretary, Miss Dent, whom he slept with one evening, then 'the next day he did what he felt was the only sensible thing,' he 'called personnel and asked them to fire her' (239). The casual, ironic normality of this understatement reveals not only something of the amoral character of the man, but also satirically exposes an unsavoury aspect of human nature, and of society.

Consistently, during Blake's journey, Cheever hammers home the pervasive materialistic consumer culture of American life, with concrete details used in the evocation of place and actions to signify America's material plenty. Walking from the office to the station, trying to dodge Miss Dent's attentions, Blake visits a bar and drinks a couple of cocktails; on the train home he watches the passing advertisements, 'a picture of a couple drinking a toast in wine, a picture of a Cat's Paw rubber heel and a picture of a Hawaiian dancer' (244). However, unlike Carver's protagonist, whose life is tumbling into a chaotic, alcoholic spiral, Blake is of that comfortable, imperturbably self-assured middle class who can look around the train carriage and think it 'a world in which there was not much very bad trouble after all' (242.) Blake's arrogance and narrow, insulated views are ironically drawn by Cheever to accentuate the character's hypocrisy, especially in light of his casual exploitation of Miss Dent and the inevitable damage this has done to her life.

Thus, Cheever uses his business executive protagonist to embody and satirize certain unwholesome attitudes he sees prevalent in American culture at that time. Blake's ruthless treatment of Miss Dent and previous quarrels with neighbours suggests a tendency towards hostility and aggression in society, a tendency fuelled by a refusal to respect or value human dignity, whilst also viewing people as disposable. His lack of compassion towards the former secretary, his feeding on the vulnerable, 'Most of the women he had known had been

picked for their low self-esteem' (238), also serves as a damning critique of the (sexist) values underpinning America's corporate culture. Furthermore, Blake's character is used to deride the excesses of rapacious individualism, a manifestation of the American dream, 'which seems to reward those who ignore selflessness in favour of selfishness' (Abramson 1993: 27), and which, Cheever subtly suggests, fragments society and leaves everyone isolated in their own worlds, despite their proximity to one another, so that 'The platform and the people on it looked lonely' (244).

Cheever's satire of selfish individualism is then crowned and made unmistakeable by the story's dramatic climax. After Miss Dent ushers Blake from the train at gunpoint, and orders him to 'Put your face in the dirt,' (247) she pronounces that even with her mental illness, 'I'm still better than you.' (247) Thus, by configuring plot and characters within an American cultural context, by showing Miss Dent's mental illness to be superior to Blake's callously exploitative and selfishly individualistic behaviour, Cheever damns the direction in which America is travelling, suggesting a moral bankruptcy beneath the affluence and material plenty.

Cheever's 'The Five-Forty-Eight', therefore, shows us not only how satire can be used to form the short story into a socio-political act, but also demonstrates, when one considers it beside Carver's view of American life, how one society, or culture, can be interrogated from many social, personal and political perspectives.

Whilst Cheever and Carver examine life in America from their own particular perspectives through different social strata, James Kelman, in 'Man to Man' (2011), uses Glasgow to explore his own themes. Taking us deep inside the character with a first person stream-of-consciousness, Kelman locates the narrative in Glasgow, not only by such

references as the 'Clyde' and 'Celtic', but also through the use of vernacular, 'gony', 'doesnay' (102) 'Ye' (103), which, whilst positioning the speaker as working-class Glaswegian, also functions as the first layer of Kelman's political act. His decision to use the Glaswegian vernacular becomes an act of resistance against the homogenizing standardized English of 'Literature.' Moreover, by employing language to establish a distinct Scottish identity, independent of English identity, Kelman's choice of idiom and register acts as a separatist resistance to the far-removed powers of Westminster with its RP language of government.

In addition, by utilizing the socio-political backdrop held immanent within the Glasgow setting, Kelman generates even deeper political resonances. With Glasgow's high levels of unemployment, poverty and lack of opportunity,⁴ there has been, in places, a breakdown of community cohesion, leaving individuals increasingly isolated within society. This social fragmentation, from a sociological point of view, is an effect that has been enhanced by the neo-liberal policies of the previous thirty-five or so years, as indicated by Margaret Thatcher's notorious comment, 'There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families' (Thatcher 1987: 9).

It is this atomization and fragmentation of community, the 'withdrawal of society' (Bauman 2009: 147), the breakdown of human togetherness, which this story dramatizes through the character's inaction and inability to intervene. Yet at no point does Kelman express any of this authorially, rather, he lets the character speak for himself, showing the 'harsh realities as they are experienced' (Cox 2005: 47), with character, action and the context of place in contemporaneity carrying the social comment, and the urban, communal

⁴ www.understandingglasgow.com/indicators/poverty/overview

space of the bar magnifying Kelman's message of isolation and alienation. In light of this, the open ending, as with Carver, by avoiding any redemptive moment, works to suggest an unchanging future, promising continued inertia. Thus Kelman's brief narrative is a subtle but potent political act. It is an act of resistance against English power, as well as a lament for the loss of community and the withdrawal of the individual into fractured isolationism.

With James Joyce's 'Two Gallants' [1914] on the other hand, the story's political content is nearer the surface and far more overtly signalled. Place is crucial in the construction of meaning, providing the specific political backdrop of British Colonial rule in Ireland, a point Joyce constantly figures, manipulates and reinforces through place names and their historical implications. Whilst Carver's Oregon is implied, and Kelman's Glasgow is denoted through vernacular and mention of local areas and football teams, Joyce uses loaded topographical specificity, with its reference to key historical moments and figures in the British subjugation of Ireland, layering symbolic meaning (the harp player) to lead the reader, subcutaneously, to the political issues under scrutiny.

The characters make no mention of the political situation, nor does the narrator. Instead, the colonial dominion is simply there, a socio-political framework within which the characters act. Indeed, against this backdrop, it is the characters' actions that form the political implication. Whilst Kelman's characters are afflicted by inertia, Joyce's characters, Lenehan and Corley, are capable of action but the scope of their actions is limited by their 'predicament,' which results in them appearing parasitical. But this parasitism, especially on Lenehan's part, can be seen as a consequence of reduced opportunities, of limited prospects due to colonial suppression: 'He was tired of knocking about, of pulling the devil by the tail, of shifts and intrigues. He would be thirty-one in November. Would he never get

a good job? Would he never have a home of his own?' (42). The basic necessities of life, of stability, are denied him.

Lenehan and Corley, therefore, are embodiments of the paralysis caused by colonial rule. Once again, the political is accessed through the personal, through human stories, this time enmeshed in a network of socio-political context figured through symbols and topographical implication to criticise British rule in Ireland. Joyce's finely wrought story, with its 'scrupulous meanness' (Joyce 1966: 134), and its tightly woven unity of effect, combining place, symbol, character and plot, is used to obliquely damn the Irish situation. It is an act of social and political dissent.

Already we can see that the short story is an effective means by which to pass socio-political comment on 'the age we live in' and 'our predicament' (Hyams 1970: 92), and writers have used it to do so again and again. The nature of that comment can vary, using different techniques to differing effect, be it to criticize, to satirize, or to bear witness to societal issues. How the writer chooses to engage with the issues he/she deems important is his/her own choice. Those choices are vast, and not necessarily restricted to the realm of realism. Franz Kafka, for example, in 'Metamorphosis' [1915], employs the surreal to form his own social and political points.

When Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous insect. He was lying on his hard shell-like back and by lifting his head a little he could see his curved brown belly, divided by stiff curving ribs... (76)

Maintaining a rigorous attention to realistic detail throughout, Kafka creates a recognizable, credible story-world within which the mundanely fantastic and the absurd can occur. Through his own style of represented consciousness, "What has happened to me?' he thought' (76), Kafka allows the transformed Gregor Samsa to 'speak' for himself and

blends this with detached, objective narration with the effect that the 'rationally impossible becomes commonplace' (Shaw 1983: 241). It is through this combination of surrealism and realist technique that Kafka then accesses deeper levels of meaning.

Like all good stories, there are many layers of meaning in 'Metamorphosis'. At the first level, the story interrogates the limits of sympathy, and asks how far familial solidarity will stretch. It also examines the effects of dependency on the individual. When, after his transformation, Gregor can no longer provide for the family, his father, mother and sister have to go to work and begin to provide for themselves. As time goes by, Gregor is gradually neglected and forgotten, and then, when he eventually emerges from his room in full view of the family's lodgers, humiliating his family, Gregor's sister Grete, pronounces 'We must try to get rid of it,' (119) and 'He's got to go.' (120) It is a sentiment with which Gregor's father concurs.

The irony of this story is that Gregor was acceptable whilst he was economically productive, but once, after his transformation, he becomes the one provided for, he is considered to be of no value in the family community. Hence, at a metaphorical level, Kafka's 'Metamorphosis' becomes a critique of the capitalist system, bringing to light how the worth of an individual is estimated. Kafka uses the story's surrealism to serve a brutally truthful political point; a point enhanced by the story's ending, when Gregor's death, the death of a non-producer, becomes an act of non-significance, a relief to the family, a negation of individual value. The family thus becomes a microcosm, representative of capitalist society's dehumanising attitudes towards economic redundancy.

Despite the difference in their representational styles, there is, in a sense, a continuum here in the political points made by both Kelman and Kafka. They both use the

short story to address, obliquely, the nature of isolation and loss of value suffered in communities where there is a deprivation of work, and both examine the nature of social fracture and fragmentation.

So far, these first five authors have shown how the short story can, in fact, engage with 'great political...or social institutions' (Hyams 1970: 92), and how they can be used to interrogate macro level political and societal issues through character, through personal stories. We've seen how the short story can assess the effects of systems of power, such as colonialism, when they are imposed on societies; we've seen how it can bear witness to the effects of dominant socio-economic systems on the individual, looking at capitalism, consumerism and the American dream from within and without; and we've seen how the short story can interrogate those systems or beliefs, and their manifestations, through satire, dissent, protest and resistance.

Always, the place and time provide the contextual socio-political framework within which the writer can work. However, it is through character, through human stories, that the writer can access, respond to and interact with his or her own society. Yet not every story has to engage with 'great political...or social institutions' in order to be political. Chekhov, for example, was highly involved in the local community around his 'Melikhovo estate, not far from Moscow' (Chudakov 2000: 11), and his experience there inspired the story 'In the Cart' [1897], which became just a small fragment in his 'aesthetic exploration of Russian society' (Polotskaya 2000: 20). During the narrative, he draws a picture of a stiflingly stratified society with the 'degradation of a Russian village' (Polotskaya 2000: 22), representing the poverty of the peasantry and their harsh, brutal lives. Moreover, by subtly filtering the narrative through the subjective thoughts of the protagonist Marya Vasilievna,

rather than making an overt authorial statement, he implies the corrupt behaviour of government officials and administrators. Of itself, this is a political act, calling a society as it truly is in the face of the contemporaneous Tsarist Russian state's 'strict censorship' (Bruford 1947: 94).

However, by focalizing the narrative through Marya, a schoolmistress, Chekhov affects another political act; humanizing and giving voice to a stratum of Russian society previously little-represented in fiction. By revealing how, following the death of her parents, Marya had been forced to work as a schoolmistress, a fate from which she cannot escape, he shows how vulnerable a woman in that society was to life's vicissitudes. Through her thoughts, he raises the readers' awareness not only of the corrupt nature of village life and government, and the difficult, under-paid lives of rural schoolteachers, he also brings our attention to the plight of women in 1890s Russia's patriarchal society. Although unhappy as a teacher, Marya is trapped in her station, so that her aspirations, her potential, must remain unfulfilled. Her only hope of escaping her current situation is figured through her dreams of marrying the local landowner, Khanov. This, however, is impossible due to the 'usual taboo' on women 'marrying out of their class' (Bruford 1947: 87). Thus whilst critiquing the class system and endemic corruption in 1890s Russia, Chekhov also dramatizes the limitations and restrictions, the enforced powerlessness, which circumscribed the lives of women at that time, in that place, using Marya's personal story to raise social awareness of that society's injustices.

Mansfield, on the other hand, examines the power dynamics of gender politics woven into the fabric of society in a different way. Whilst Chekhov gives Marya voice, writing from her perspective, Mansfield, in the first portion of her story 'Marriage à la

Mode' [1921], writes from a male perspective. Strategically, she uses the character of William to embody some of the patriarchal attitudes prevalent in England at the time of writing, just three years after the initial enfranchisement of women over the age of thirty in 1918.

William, a lawyer, is on the train and looks up from the papers he is taking home with him from chambers. His judgement that the girl running along the station platform is 'Hysterical' illustrates the demeaning, masculine view that women are emotionally less rational. Through this combination of action and free indirect thought, in conjunction with the social situation in England at the time, where professions were largely inaccessible to women due to a patriarchal culture which deemed women too emotional and weak for such work, Mansfield layers in subtle, ironic social comment.

In addition, as William recalls moments from the past and reflects on the decay of his marriage, we see that his view and expectations of Isabel and of marriage are constructed through 'masculine definitions of women's positions in relation to civilization' (Kaplan 2009: 32). Whilst he, as financial provider, fulfilled the role of power, he had assumed that Isabel would willingly fulfil her subjugated role as housewife and mother, and 'hadn't the slightest idea that she wasn't as happy as he was' (274). Through William, therefore, Mansfield figures the masculine lack of understanding that a wife and mother may not feel satisfied within a role shaped by patriarchal expectations, whilst Isabel's 'new' behaviour manifests a rejection of the role constructed by a masculine society and an attempt to break free. By choosing personal happiness over 'duty', Isabel's is an act of self-determination. And yet, she is not fully free, since she does not earn her own money, and her current freedoms are only afforded by William's income.

Written in 1921 during the first wave of feminism and enfranchisement, when the role of women in society was in nascent transformation, 'Marriage à la Mode', through its political polyphony, obliquely raises questions of contemporaneous relevance. By probing and dramatizing the dominant patriarchal attitudes of the time, Mansfield was responding to the political, social and cultural shifts within society. Far from it being the case that the short story has 'nothing to do with the age we live in and cannot say much about our predicament' (Hyams 1970: 92), Chekhov, Mansfield, Kelman, Carver, Cheever, Joyce and Kafka demonstrate how writers have consistently used the short story to engage with the key issues intrinsic to those societies and the times in which they lived. As Nadine Gordimer said, 'the writer's themes and characters inevitably are formed by the pressures and distortions of that society as the life of the fisherman is determined by the power of the sea' (Gordimer 1991). Just as Frederic Jameson would recommend the reader to 'Always historicize' (Jameson 2002: 1) in order to discover the latent socio-political content within a piece, it is incumbent on the writer to provide the content in the first place, to absorb, assess and then layer contemporary issues into the work in order to serve his or her own ends.

Whilst Chekhov filtered narrative through a woman's perspective and Mansfield through a man's, each to highlight gender issues circumscribing the lives of women, female writers have continued to chart female emancipation, an issue central to any consideration of equality within a society. Helen Simpson, with stories like 'Hey Yeah Right Get a Life' (2000) and 'Burns and Bankers' (2000), has interrogated how far the process of female emancipation, which began in Mansfield's time, has since travelled. With these stories she shows, from different angles, the diversity of roles that women as wife and mother can now perform, whilst also evaluating what each woman loses as a consequence of the choices

made. Both these stories, however, do show how women now have a greater right to determine their own roles and positions in society; a far cry from the circumscribed choices available to Marya Vasilievna in 'In the Cart' and Isabel in Mansfield's 'Marriage à la Mode'.

Simpson, therefore, continues to respond, in her own way, to issues which remain hugely important within British society. Each story can provide us with insight by snapshot, capturing moments in societal evolution, reflecting the crucial issues of the day. By giving us these tightly compressed, personal, human tales, the short story continues to engage with its time and social history. One need only look at Alice Munro's short stories to see how she captures 'the predicament' of her age, by keying not only into feminist issues, but also those of Canadian national identity, with one issue signifying the other.

With her retrospective 'Family Furnishings' (2001), Munro captures the changing possibilities available to Canadian women through the 1950s, 60s, and 70s in light of the second wave of feminism in North America, and charts the process of breaking free from the expectations of previous generations. In the story, although the narrator's parents remained unhappily married until the mother died, Munro's narrator divorces, ending her 'marriage for personal – that is to say, wanton, reasons...' (113). This establishes the shifts in society at the time, and a woman's increasing agency and freedom of choice to end an unhappy marriage. And yet the old attitudes are shown to persist, as embodied by the narrator's father with his opinions regarding divorce and 'reservations...about what might be called my character...' (113). The narrator's ability to break away from these older values and norms in a way that Chekhov's schoolmistress never could, allows her to become independent and pursue a career as a writer. It is a freedom her father's cousin, Alfrida, of the previous generation, had never achieved, being restricted to, or restricting herself to the

domestic sphere, writing articles in the local newspaper about 'dinner sets' and 'beauty treatments' (87), and so professionally perpetuating the patriarchal expectation of women's interests. Munro's protagonist, however, writes about whatever she chooses, liberating herself from the domestic 'The Angel in the House'⁵ (Patmore 2006: 1) notions of femininity.

Thus the narrative charts the narrator's renegotiation of her relationship to society. Of itself this is a political act. Yet, it has further political meaning in the Canadian context. By redefining the boundaries of what constitutes female identity in relation to former societal expectations, Munro is also engaged in the remodelling of a post-colonial Canadian identity in light of Canada's gaining partial autonomy in 1931, and complete independence from Great Britain in 1982.

The short story, therefore, is an ideal tool with which to assess society in bitesize pieces. It can penetrate any facet of society, of life, and examine any issues from any angle, showing us lives from any social stratum. It can assess the effects of capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy; chart the growth of female identity and post-colonial identity; it can debunk the myth of the American dream; it can show us the immigrant experience in a new country as did Bernard Malamud, or explore the attitudes of people within a country towards incoming immigrants as in Julian Barnes's 'East Wind' (2011), raising questions about multiculturalism; it can show us the lives of those holding power, or those denied power, those left behind. It can address any issue affecting our times, from within or without.

⁵ 'The Angel in the House' by Coventry Patmore represented a repressive Victorian ideal of femininity whereby women were expected to be devoted and submissive to their husbands, to be passive and subjugated to the domestic sphere, keeping home and making the man happy after his return from the public world of work. By 1931, Virginia Woolf had written that 'Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer' (Woolf [1931]: 238).

Again and again, the short story provides us with snapshots of our age, capturing freeze-framed moments in the process of change, interrogating the issues at play. Yet beneath the political levels of meaning, these are personal stories. And within every story there are the relational conflicts and small scale personal politics that form the fibre of everyday life and human contact. These figure in the ways in which people position themselves against one another: with the politics of dissolving marriage in 'A Serious Talk' and 'Marriage à la Mode'; of sexual exploitation in 'Two Gallants' and 'The Five-Forty-Eight'; of a man in 'Hills like White Elephants' [1927a] wanting a woman to choose to have an abortion so he doesn't have to make the decision, and of intimidation and threat in 'The Killers' [1927b]. Through interpersonal politics, the existential can be reached, asking us fundamental questions about how we live.

In addition to this, whilst mapping the human condition through dramatization, by setting characters within a specific place, at a specific time, employing the loaded socio-political implications therein, the short story can become a socio-political act. Moreover, by giving voice to previously unrepresented social groups, by bearing witness to life as it is, by enacting the conflicts between individual and society, by asking questions about the world in which we live, by being acts of protest, dissent and resistance, by highlighting injustice, by satirizing the unacceptable face of normality through the everyday personal politics of human relationships, the short story has the potential to be a fundamentally socio-political form. It is by consistently responding to the society within which the writer lives, that the short story can remain culturally relevant, and as well as conveying 'considerable pleasure,'

it can have everything 'to do with the age we live in,' and speak volumes 'about our predicament' (Hyams 1970: 92).⁶

Therefore, although a short story is never going to change the world, it is too myopic a view to say that it is 'unable to deepen our understanding of the world or of one another' (Bergonzi 1970: 218). Rather, by showing issues political, social, economic, personal and existential, by showing us life from different angles, the short story can lead us to interrogate the human experience more honestly, and by capturing moments in the ongoing flux of existence, moments in the progress and decline of personal lives and civilizations, it can also encourage us to see beyond the narrow scope of self and be more aware of the world and people around us.

⁶ In 1970 writer and literary critic Edward Hyams wrote 'Writing short stories is like painting conventional watercolours: it calls for just as much skill as ever, but it has nothing to do with the age we live in, and cannot say much about our predicament.' He went on to say that the, unlike the novel, the short story is unable to engage with the 'great political and social institutions' (Hyams 1970: 92) that affect our lives. In the same year, critic Bernard Bergonzi asserted that the short story is 'unhealthily limited, both in the range of literary experience it offers and in its capacity to deepen our understanding of the world or of one another' (Bergonzi 1970: 218).

Chapter 4

The Short Story Cycle: Extending Possibility

Although the preceding chapters have argued that the short story has significant socio-political capacity, the singular short story is not the terminus of its potential. Instead, the siting of stories within a short story cycle opens up the possibility not only of providing a snapshot or fleeting glimpse of one life within a society, but also to render that society more expansively, to interrogate issues more thoroughly from a multiplicity of perspectives. By interfacing one short story with another, snapshot by snapshot, a fragmentary, non-linear portrait of a place and its people, a life or an issue can be constructed.

According to Susan Garland Mann, the short story cycle (Ingram 1971, Mann 1989, Davis 1997) is tied together, to varying degrees, by one or more of the following unities: time, place, theme, character and imagery, and it is the unified, composed nature of the cycle which differentiates it from the more diffuse story collection or miscellany (Mann 1989: 1-39). Although no definitive conclusion has been reached about what precisely constitutes a short story cycle, I will be guided in this instance by Garland Mann, who states that, 'there is only one essential characteristic of the short story cycle: the stories are both self-sufficient and interrelated' (Mann 1989: 15). This is indeed the case in James Joyce's *Dubliners*.⁷ Each story is entirely self-sufficient and complete; each can be read separately and understood, yet when combined, the sequence of discrete, individual stories implicitly builds a picture of a place and its people. Each story features a different protagonist, visits a different area of the city, and reveals a fresh aspect of life as it is lived in that place. With his

⁷ I have not examined *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) by Sherwood Anderson in this dissertation because I felt that *Dubliners* and *Union Street* would cover the place-based cycle sufficiently and were of more realist relevance.

topographical specificity and scrupulous attention to detail, Joyce evokes a vivid, expansive Dublin story-world at the turn of the twentieth century. Characters lead us around the streets, across town, on foot, by bus, in carriages, taking us into boarding houses, hotels, pubs, offices and homes where family life occurs, from festive gatherings to domestic abuse.

As well as exposing the city, opening up private and public spaces, Joyce also presents society from a variety of social positions, male, female, and even from a child's perspective, with each new subjectivity laying bare another stratum of society. Thus we are carried from the realm of the upper-middle-class nouveau-riche in 'After the Race,' through the middle-class family gathering of 'The Dead', into the world of office workers with 'Counterparts', salesmen in 'The Boarding House', and shop girls in 'Eveline'. We also descend into the world of ne'er-do-well political canvassers in 'Ivy Day at the Committee Room' and the loafers and leeches of 'Two Gallants'. Although all of these stories stand independently, by setting the characters and action in a specific time and place, Joyce not only constructs the connective unity of the short story cycle, but also generates the fabric of existence in that place.

However, whilst the cycle is unified at this broad level, the characters remain physically separated from one another, immured within the boundaries of their own narratives. No characters leak across into anyone else's story, and yet they are all part of the society which *Dubliners*, as a whole, represents. This separateness within the whole is used to epitomize how individuals are isolated and alienated within the stifling, atrophying Dublin society. The characters are unable to break out of their narrative confinement, to make connection, the formal choice exemplifying their stasis, their paralysis.

The overarching theme of paralysis, the 'inability to escape, or move out of the grooves of thought or action [people] have slotted themselves (or been slotted) into' (Johnson 2000: xxxi), further binds together the sequence of stories. In Joyce's view, this paralysis was caused by a confluence of factors: British colonial rule, Irish nationalist politics which sought to 'purify Irish culture and reclaim a mythical origin...but held Ireland back by refusing to see the past as an invention' (March Russell 2009: 109), and the restrictive influence of the Catholic Church. The effect of these factors was to leave the Irish people stranded between the past and the future, to restrict people's opportunities and range of choices, and by acculturation, make them unable to act or exact change, or, if they did manage to act, to corrupt those actions. This social, political, personal and spiritual paralysis is reflected in the stories as the characters are repeatedly faced with the choice to act or to remain passive and be acted upon. The theme gathers mass through the cycle as Joyce shows how it reaches into all corners of the city, affecting and limiting lives of every class.

Eveline, 'passive, like a helpless animal' (29), is too weak, too inured to escape her life, her home, and leave Dublin behind; Bob Doran in 'The Boarding House', trapped into marriage by a mother and her daughter, accepts his fate despite wishing he could 'ascend through the roof and fly away to another country where he would never again hear of his trouble' (51); 'Two Gallants' shows Corley's exploitation of the 'slavey'; and in 'Counterparts' Farrington is bullied at work, then gets drunk afterwards and goes home to bully his son. At a metaphorical, socio-political level, the narratives mirror the plight of Dublin's people. Joyce shows how the Dubliners have been conditioned to inertia, are unable to act, accepting of an imposed situation, and how that situation has limited and corrupted society so that it turns in and abuses its own. By means of individual short stories, laid down one snapshot after another, Joyce drives home his impression of the city, its

people and their lives, demonstrating the potential of the short story cycle to offer ‘a panoramic view of a setting,’ and lend ‘itself to an exploration of the unique cultural identity shared by a group of people’ (Creighton 1977: 154). Using the unities of time, place and reiterated theme throughout the sequence, Joyce not only consolidates the disparate elements, but also constructs a greater socio-political comment than could be expressed in one single story.

The stories, however, are interrelated by more than just time, place and theme. They are bound together with subtly linking pairs. ‘Two Gallants’ and ‘The Boarding House’ treat ‘seduction from opposing views of the single life’ (Connolly 1969: 114); ‘Counterparts’ and ‘Little Cloud’ deal with the frustrations and resentments of married male parents; ‘Clay’ and ‘A Painful Case’ look at middle-aged celibates from male and female perspectives. Furthermore, the underlying ordering of the stories moves through chiasmic groups sub-headed by Joyce as childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life, with ‘The Dead’ added at the end. Hence *Dubliners* demonstrates how the ‘short story cycle displays a double tendency of asserting the individuality of its components on the one hand, and of highlighting, on the other, the bonds of unity which make the many into a whole’ (Ingram 1969: 19). Indeed, Joyce shows this tendency can be used to socio-political ends.

Whilst characters are isolated within their discrete stories, prisoners in their own narrow worlds and lives, they are also parts of the society which the whole story sequence coheres to represent. Thus, the very nature of the fragmented, modular form can be exploited as the ideal tool with which to depict the isolated, dislocated individual within the fragmented, decaying society, the form functioning to embody meaning. In this way, the short story, whilst retaining its formal qualities, can reach beyond the restriction of its

individual smallness, and by combining with other strategically designed stories can be used to create a portrait of society, as well as to construct a larger statement, a louder, more significant protest. As *Dubliners* demonstrates, by using the short story cycle form, the short story's socio-political potential can be massively magnified. And yet still the short story remains what it always was, a means of examining personal lives in miniature.

Whilst Joyce's place-based cycle was intended to advance 'the course of civilization in Ireland' by giving its people 'one good look at themselves' and their paralysis in his 'nicely polished looking-glass' (Joyce 1966: 64), Helen Simpson's *Hey Yeah Right Get a Life* adapts the form for a different purpose. Her story cycle is set in London, but neither the city nor national wellbeing is the focus of the text, instead it examines motherhood in modern society.

Like *Dubliners*, Simpson's cycle is constructed from a sequence of stories which can be read independently; indeed, many of the stories were published individually. However, rather than have the stories entirely separate from one another, as in *Dubliners*, Simpson engineers subtle linkages by having the protagonist from one story as a bit part player in another. For example, the first story, 'Lentils and Lilies,' looks at motherhood through the critical eyes of teenager Jade Beaumont, who is the babysitter for Dorrie in the third story 'Hey Yeah Right Get a Life.' Later, Jade's mother is the protagonist in the fifth story 'Burns and Bankers.' Whilst having all the characters belong to the metropolitan middle-class professional milieu at the turn of the millennium adds a unity to the whole, these linkages between stories provide a spine to the cycle. Moreover, making these connections also enables the stories to be brought more sharply into contrast.

Through the discreet conduction of Jade's character, the detached stories of Dorrie in 'Hey Yeah Right,' who sacrifices herself and her career willingly to selfless motherhood at the cost of identity, and Jade's mother, Nicola Beaumont, the career-driven mother of four who relies on nannies to raise her children, are drawn into a dialogic, diametric opposition. But rather than hammering home a consistent viewpoint as Joyce did with paralysis, Simpson aligns alternative possibilities of the mother's role. She does this not to make a corrective point or to favour one view over another, but to present the contrast, the range of possibilities, and to gauge what is lost by each. Juxtaposed with Dorrie and Nicola are the mothers in 'Café Society.' Meeting for a coffee, whilst minding a boisterous child, they are barely able to communicate through the fog of fatigue. They are mothers who work 'round the edges' (Simpson 2000: 14), freelancing to stay in the job market. Both are frayed and worn by sleeplessness; both have damaged their careers because they have had to take days off sick when their children were ill whilst their husbands went to work. Simpson thus extends the debate about the sacrifices women must make and the inequity in parenting contribution. Set against this is 'Wurstigkeit' with recently divorced mother, Laura, and still married mother of four, Isobel Marley QC. Both are corporate professionals, who sneak out of work between meetings and appointments for a shopping trip to a secret, expensive clothing outlet, dramatizing the luxury of taking a private moment, a private, personal pleasure, away from the pulls and compromises of family and work whilst endorsing the joys of materialism.

By presenting the range of middle-class attitudes towards motherhood, Simpson captures a moment in time in British society as it transitions towards greater equality. She raises questions about the role of women as mothers, about how men are still privileged, how women who desire career may forfeit maternity, whilst those who embrace

motherhood can forfeit career and lose a sense of self. However, Simpson offers no answers, no conclusion to the argument; she merely holds up examples to which the reader can react and respond, thus revealing how 'a multi-faceted short story [cycle] can show the true complexity of life without pandering to the simpleton's urge to prove this way Right and that way Wrong' (Simpson 2006: xi).

After considering the difference between Dorrie and Nicola, plus the various versions of motherhood in between, it becomes evident how individual short stories placed in connection can generate the tension between two opposing thoughts or concepts. As further points of view are added through additional stories, the issue in question becomes increasingly textured and complex, representing the confusing ambiguity of life. For this to be achieved however, the writer must make strategic choices as to how to intertwine the threads of the various stories and to what effect, whilst, at the same time, keeping the narratives independent. The writer, having decided where the points of connection and disjuncture occur, can then exploit the tensions generated between pieces. When the proliferation of subjectivities is constructed effectively, the writer can create 'reflections' which wash back across the interstices, expanding each story's meaning and raising unwritten questions through proximity and comparison. In this way, the meaning of the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts.

Rather than being 'the perfect genre for a writer who can't plot a novel' (Russo 2016), the short story cycle is a distinct form requiring deliberate craft, its purpose and mechanisms different from those of the novel. The cycle writer is a 'mosaicist, assembling fragments...to form what can be understood, at a greater distance, as a coherent, shapely image' (Smartt Bell 1997: 215). The cycle, as a whole, does not follow a linear cause and

effect narrative, but is instead constructed so that the tones and shades of individual stories work against each other impressionistically.

To achieve this successfully, however, the individual stories must be carefully counterpointed, their organization carefully managed. As Antonya Nelson noted 'You don't want to repeat yourself and you don't want to have the movement of each new story replicate too closely the movement of the last story' (Nelson 2000). And this is why both Joyce's and Simpson's cycles are effective; the narrative arc, the movement of each story is different. Each story's individuality separates it from the others, each taking a new angle, probing a fresh facet of life, each provoking its own emotional response. Then, when the stories are combined, they generate a nuanced, polyphonic whole to which the reader must respond in his/her own individual way, the text refusing answers through its lack of narrative resolution. The crafting of the individual pieces, their balance amongst the whole, and against one another, enables the writer to interrogate society and relevant themes from myriad disjunctive angles. Moreover, by balancing emotional provocations against one another, by the sequencing of stories of different paces, lengths and tones to create internal rhythm within the cycle, the writer is able to texture the reader experience.

Already we begin to see the choices available to a writer when constructing the short story cycle, and how those choices can contribute to the overall effect and meaning. As we look at Pat Barker's *Union Street* (1982), a cycle of seven stories, we become aware of yet more possibilities. Rather than encompassing a whole city as did *Dubliners*, Barker narrows the focus of her setting to just one street and the lives of women who live there. Although Barker's is an alternative representation of women's lives to that of Helen

Simpson's, both writers document points in social history, their cycles offering contrasting views of women's roles in society at different times, in different classes.

Set in the early 1970s, *Union Street* tells the stories of seven women through an interlocking sequence of narratives, exploring the female experience in a northern, industrial-town, working-class community, which revolves around the local blast furnace and the cake bakery. The graphically biological stories explore 'narrow-mindedness, poverty, brutality...male oppression and violence' (Head 2002: 68), covering subject matter like rape, neglect, racism, pregnancy, abortion and domestic abuse. The picture of life Barker paints is uniformly grim, but again and again through the stories we come to understand how such conditions were accepted as normal and endured.

The stories of *Union Street* are far more interwoven and connected than both *Dubliners* and *Hey Yeah Right Get a Life*. Throughout the book, Barker has characters consistently figuring in other people's stories. Iris King is present in many: Kelly Brown's mother confides in her after Kelly is raped, she cares for Muriel Scaife's children when Muriel's husband dies, then Iris has her own story in which her daughter has a back street abortion, and Iris disposes of the foetus in a rubble heap. Mrs Harrison is present in Joanne Wilson's story as a woman in the street, then in 'Blonde Dinah' when her ignored husband sleeps with an ageing local prostitute. This overlapping, with protagonists turning up as extras in other protagonists' stories, enables Barker to generate the sense of community, of lives lived in a shared locale. The portrayal of this community is then made even more realistic by the prevalence of judgement and gossip: when Mrs Brown tearfully tells Iris of Kelly's rape and Iris goes to make some restorative tea, Mrs Brown knows that 'Iris wouldn't

keep any of this to herself...' (38), and Iris, in the kitchen, was 'more inclined to withhold her sympathy and make judgements. Her bairn! Where had she been when it happened?' (38).

Moreover, this integration of people's stories, even through gossip, is used to extend stories that have previously ended. For instance, the second story, 'Joanne Wilson,' charts how the protagonist, still only eighteen, is pregnant with her boyfriend's child. During the course of the story she informs her boyfriend, Ken, who agrees that they will have to get married. The story ends with Joanne sitting in her friend Joss's lounge eating fish and chips, saying wistfully, 'I wish I didn't have to go' (106), her thoughts exposing how she is fearful for her adult future, 'Housework. And, eventually, a baby' (106). With this open ending, Barker suggests the imminent changes in Joanne's life, but these are not revealed because Joanne's narrative ends. However, details of those changes leak through Iris King's story when she and Joss are chatting:

'I see Joanne Wilson's married.'
 'Aye, I saw. Big wedding' [...]
 'She was in two minds, you know. Right up till the end.' (219)

In this way, Barker not only manages to extend the development of the previous 'Joanne Wilson' narrative, but also, with the open ending and the later gossipy aside, produces a feeling of continuity, of lives ongoing, running alongside each other. It is an effect which reinforces the representation of the fictive local community by simulating characters' simultaneous co-existence. However, the stories still stand independently, reminding us that for all the sense of community generated by the aforementioned techniques, despite the ideas of class solidarity hinted at by the book's title, regardless of the shared poverty and hardship, the characters ultimately face their problems alone. Liza Goddard, beaten by her husband when pregnant, gives birth and rediscovers love as she holds her child; Muriel Scaife, in spite of people's kindness when her husband dies, is left to

face her impoverished future on her own after the funeral. Barker gives an account of these women's lives within the community, yet each new story, each new subjectivity, shows the women's isolated experience. By utilizing the tension between continuity and discontinuity, Barker is able to highlight the fragmentary nature of the individual within society.

Perhaps this is most clearly illustrated when the final story is linked back to the first. At the end of the first story in which Kelly Brown has endured a squalid rape, she sits for a while with an old woman on a park bench. Kelly offers to help the old woman get back home as the cold evening sets in, but the old woman refuses. They sit holding hands for a while, then Kelly leaves her and walks home, back to her life in Union Street. The final story reveals that the old woman, Alice Bell, has chosen to sit out in the cold in order to die of exposure rather than be put into a home and have her pride and dignity taken away. Kelly and Alice are bit part players in one another's stories; they live on the same street but do not know each other; they share a few anonymous moments together and then they separate to move forward towards their own private destinies. Whilst this tightly woven 'cyclical organization implies continuity' (Head 2002: 68), with characters who live on the same street connecting in different narratives serving to augment the notion of community, the stories ultimately tell of isolation, brutality and despair.

As this brief survey of Joyce, Barker and Simpson's works has demonstrated, the short story cycle is an ideal tool with which to build a polyphonic, multivalent representation of a town, city, society or community, employing the short story's capacity to interrogate that milieu from a wide variety of separate subjectivities. But more than this, it is also a form particularly suited to render the individual, or a selection of individuals,

isolated within a fragmented society or community. In a time of increasing atomization, it is a form that remains relevant of itself.

Of course, the short story cycle does not have to be restricted to place and community. Instead, it can simply circle around a theme, like John Updike's *Trust Me* (1987) which examines trust and betrayal from a variety of angles, but primarily through the filter of marriage, family and the effects on children. None of the characters in this cycle leaks into other stories and there is no common setting in which the stories occur. More loosely bound, Updike's cycle broadly represents the marital mores of middle-America as opposed to shaping a portrayal of local identity. Alternatively, a short story cycle can chart the maturation of a central protagonist as in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1989). Cisneros's sequence of very short stories, or vignettes, follows the life of Esperanza, a Mexican-American girl who grows up in the oppressive Hispanic quarter of Chicago, where she discovers the harsh realities of life.

The scope of the short story cycle is vast, ranging from the diffuse, tangential theme-based cycle like Updike's, to Simpson's subtly interlinked stories which examine middle-class motherhood in the round; from representations of community, society and place with Joyce's pointedly separated stories, to Barker's tightly interwoven structure portraying a small impoverished community, or the Bildungsroman form of Cisneros, which charts life from the perspective of a population group rarely represented in literature.

The fact that both Cisneros's and Barker's versions of the short story cycle blur the boundaries where a short story cycle ends and a novel begins, enabled both works to be marketed as novels, in response to market forces whereby novels sell in greater numbers than short story collections. Perhaps this is the way, by calling itself by another name, that

the short story cycle can overreach publishers' prejudices and any accusations of limitation. Nevertheless, despite of the way they are marketed, these works are still cycles. As Cisneros insisted when discussing *The House on Mango Street* (1982), 'I wanted to write a series of stories that you could open up at any point. You didn't need to know anything before or after and you would understand each story like a pearl, or you could look at the whole thing like a necklace' (Cisneros 2009: 106). Regardless of the name one pins onto any of these story cycles, for sales reasons or otherwise, they remain a series of individual short stories which are both independent yet interrelated. However, it is with the short story cycle's connected form that the writer can, by positioning individual stories in conjunction or juxtaposition so that they reflect against one another, expand the individual story's potential for implication.

We have seen that the short story is a flexible, versatile art form requiring precision and an economy of implication, a metonymic form that can suggest a whole life through a glimpse and generate meaning that extends beyond its narrow limits. Again and again writers have renewed the form, crafting individual voice and style, as well as re-shaping and extending the short story's broad range of formal and technical possibilities in order to represent and interrogate the human condition as they see it.

Moreover, we have seen how the evocation of place has been used in this process. The efficient building of a detailed story-world not only augments verisimilitude and supplies the spatio-temporal hooks on which the reader can hang his/her interpretations, but it can also be used to shape tone and effect compression. Furthermore, by situating credible character and action in a setting that represents the real world, the writer can once

more renew the realist short story by using it to forge literary snapshots of the 'changing historical reality' (Williams 1975: 289) of the place represented. But more than this, by siting a story in a setting related to the real world, even if it is a fictional town in an actual region, like Cheever's 'Shady Hill,' place in time can provide an implicit socio-political context against which character and action can work. By making use of this context, the writer can consistently renew his/her response to the world, and use the short story to bear witness, make protest, enact resistance, ask questions, and satirize failings. Thus, by capturing freeze frames fictive moments in the ongoing process of societal flux, the writer can use the short story to consistently respond to the issues of his/her time, exploring the social, personal, political and existential, whilst mapping the human condition with pointillist precision.

With its openness to innovation, and its capacity to reflect life back at us, to make comment and encourage the reader to ask questions, the short story can remain perennially valid and responsive to change, granting insight into life and contemporaneity, albeit one glimpse at a time.

By placing short stories in connection within the story cycle form, the writer can then expand this capacity. When stories are communed within the cycle, juxtaposing and reflecting against one another, the range of implication can extend still further, enabling the writer to broaden his/her field of vision by representing life from a multiplicity of perspectives and engage with a vast array of issues.

REFLECTIVE COMMENTARY

As the critical commentary has demonstrated, the modern realist short story is a form with which writers have consistently represented and interrogated both the human condition and society. It is a long tradition which ranges from Chekhov's 'aesthetic exploration' (Polotskaya 2000: 20) of Russian society, and Joyce's 'nicely polished looking-glass' (Joyce 1966: 66) reflection of Dublin, through to current practitioners such as Alice Munro and Helen Simpson. In keeping with this, my own intention was to use the short story to respond creatively to the world around me in order to portray life as it is whilst also assessing the times and the society in which I live.

To achieve this, I decided to situate all the stories within a fictionalized version of Alton, a small town in Hampshire. Alton is a place of both affluence and poverty, with people living in proximity though often without connection. It was a corner of middle England I wished to place under the microscope. A series of short stories, I realized, would enable me to reflect different facets of life in such a small town, and examine how horizons of expectation and experience differ for characters from across the spectrum of age, class and gender in that very specific geographical and sociological setting.

The choice to bind these stories into a cycle followed naturally from this. At a basic level, I felt the cycle form could provide an appropriate unity to the collection. With a will to explore the class and generational divisions inherent to such a corner of society, the cycle, with the simultaneous independence and interrelation of its component stories, would enable me to shape a panoramic portrayal of Alton/Sudleigh as I explored both the

connections of community and the town's fractured nature, with its different social strata co-existing though rarely coming into contact.

Although the source material for the cycle's stories has its roots in 25 years of observation and experience, the stories are not drawn directly from life. Instead, they are fictions woven from remembered fragments of people, situations and events which have been re-formed through the creative process.

'A Planted Flag', for instance, was inspired by a woman working in a shop; she was wearing a Santa hat and treating the customers with terse resentment. Her failed marriage was my own invention. The manager character was drawn from another shop in a different town. Mrs Bennett, who pretends to sell her house, derives from a story I was told by someone who'd heard of an elderly lady who did something similar. Sheila's living conditions, having not yet unpacked, are drawn from my own regular experiences of moving into new accommodation. In 'We Need to Talk,' the Caroline character emerges from two of my former landladies. One was a glass artist with a cat, the other was a counsellor whose habit was to try to analyse me and then explain the techniques, such as transactional analysis, that she was employing. Tony's character is a fusion of my own along with scraps taken from other people. The characters and events are amalgams fashioned from diverse sources, taken out of their context then remoulded and repurposed through imagination and writing technique in order to meet the project's requirements.

The mere fashioning of source material into fiction, however, was not enough to satisfy the demands of this project. If I wanted to represent and interrogate a small-town society like Alton with its community, along with its class and generational divisions, if I wanted to generate a sense of the characters' lives unfolding in that shared space, I would

not only need to develop my own authorial voice, I would also need to craft an engaging slice-of-life style. I wanted the stories to be infused with a sense of ordinariness in order to capture the casual flow of life. The style would also have to be flexible enough to represent the required variety of characters and render the tragi-comic stories of failure and loss, crisis and change, renegotiation and, very occasionally, redemption that I wished to tell. Moreover, I wanted the stories to suggest the characters' whole lives as well as to reflect the society through which they travelled, so that these were not just snapshots of the characters, but of life in the town. In addition, I realized I needed to craft a style which could, through the personal, ask questions of the reader and resonate with levels of socio-political implication, so that the stories had the potential to engage sub-textually with the project's latent themes of cohesion, fragmentation and loss of identity.

To achieve all this, I researched the short story in order to gain an understanding of the form's traits and techniques. Then, through creative practice, I began to explore the form and develop a style which would allow me to meet the project's needs. In so doing, I began to shape the form in order to represent and interrogate life in Sudleigh.

During the initial exploratory stages of writing, I experimented with first person stories, monologues, and third person present tense narratives. Whilst these were interesting excursions, I did not feel they suited the project. I decided, instead, that all the protagonists should be equal, with no perspective privileged over any other. For this reason, I wrote all the stories in the third person. I also opted for a uniform past tense narration, suspecting that a collection of present tense stories could become cloying. Despite the past tense narration, however, I wanted the stories to have a drama-like quality, an immediacy that would make them feel alive.

Because the stories are about everyday people with everyday lives, I have used reasonably plain language, since ostentatious diction would be at odds with the characters and situations represented. In keeping with this, I have been distrustful of simile, feeling it would scream 'Look at me' a little too loudly amongst the naturalistic stories I was crafting. Instead, the clipped prose style states things simply, delivering only the information necessary to direct the reader's visual imagination and bring the scene and characters to life.

Sleet slapped against the windscreen, the wiper-blades squealed. Warm, stale air was gusting in through the van's vents.

'I've never known anything like it,' Frank said. He drew hard on his cigarette, a column of ash falling. 'We had them with that rhumba.'

From the passenger seat, Ted quietly watched the curtain-drawn houses slide by. (22)

Although I have, like Hemingway and Carver, pared away unnecessary adjectives and adverbs in order to keep the narrative fast flowing, I have aimed to make the prose rhythmic, fluent and attuned to language's music. Yet always the narration is minimal and succinct, with the authorial presence almost transparent, so that dialogue, action and detail can carry the narrative. In this way the telling of the story does not stand in the way of the drama and the reader is made to 'confront the scene directly' (Stuckey 1975: 131).

However, the stories are not merely told from an objective narrative position. I have developed my own malleable style, blending objective and subjective modes, leaning towards whichever is best suited to any given story or moment.

'Don't be like that, Frank.'

'Like what?'

Ted pushed his glasses up his nose. 'Look at it. Gill's pregnant. You can't start clearing off on the cruise ships for six months, can you?'

'That's not the point though, is it?' Frank shook his head then braked hard and swerved onto a side street. 'How long have you known?'

'I've got to think about my career...'

‘What career?’ Frank laughed sourly. The van slowed; its tyre scuffed the kerb outside Ted’s flat, the ground floor of a red brick terrace. He cut the engine; the heater fell silent. ‘I should have known you’d do something like this.’

Ted turned down the corners of his mouth, shrugged. (23-4)

In this instance, the narration objectively renders external views of the characters, allowing the mimetic dialogue and action to carry the narrative so that the drama can run.

In this mode I have let characters’ actions speak.

This was a conscious decision so that the characters could feel ‘alive,’ their physical responses supplementing the dialogue, contributing to characterization and economically generating sub-textual meaning. Furthermore, these physical actions were intended to enhance the sense that the action is unfolding ‘live’, augmenting the impression that the reader is witnessing a filmic, or theatrical scene, and thus helping the past tense narrative to feel present.

However, while ‘The Soloist’ may begin with an objective, external focalization, at other points in the story the narrative mode shifts, and Ted’s thoughts are revealed.

‘Missed the children growing up, didn’t you?’ the woman said, matter-of-factly.

‘Well, someone had to pay the school fees,’ he replied drily.

Ted’s gaze strayed out of the window. No, he wasn’t missing anything, being single, being free. (27-8)

Here the style blends objective and free indirect positions to shape greater character depth, with Ted’s interiority suggesting his inner tussle as to whether he has made the right choices in life. In this mode, the protagonist becomes the focalizer so that we experience the narrative world through his perceptions and thoughts.

Ted moved across the front of the stage, to the shadowy corner by the fire door, watching as more people filtered in. It was going to be a good turnout; fifty or sixty Alan had predicted earlier. The room was filling. He smoothed his moustache... (31)

I have used this style, weaving together external and internal action, to carry the reader deeper into character. This proximity to the character also enables analeptic

glimpses into his/her past. At the Organ Club, for instance, during a conversation, Ted remembers a time when he was on the cruise ships, 'They were rolling in heavy seas. Someone had requested 'Je t'aime.' That was the last time he'd tried his falsetto in public...' (31). These flashes and reflections are intended to reveal the character's inner life, to make him seem more 'human,' his memories deepening characterization, granting insight into his history beyond the story's 'present', and shaping spontaneity as they spark off present action. Moreover, by delivering fabula in this appropriately economical manner, I have aimed to subtly compress the story.

While 'The Soloist' leans more towards an objective position, with subjective flashes, other stories, such as 'We Need to Talk,' tend toward a more dominant free indirect style, fusing inner and outer worlds.

Tony strode up the long hill to town, the traffic whipping by, incessant. A flash of colour in a garden caught his eye. A red Labour sign on a post had toppled behind the low wall. How had he not told Caroline? Somehow, it was never the right time. It was a skill she had. He passed the church, the Conservative Club, the newly built retirement flats on the corner of the side street. (88)

This style, like Mansfield and Simpson's, blends external action and detail with interiority, exposing Tony's thoughts as he walks. The style is chosen because showing Tony's thoughts is essential, not only to reveal his judgments, his resentments and to generate the humorous disparity between thought and deed, but also to allow access to his creative process later in the piece. The choice of narrative position has always been selected with an eye to what will best suit the story, what will most effectively make a character or situation come alive.

Elsewhere in the story, the style shifts to a more objective position.

'I've already taken the lid off for you.'

'What?'

'The paint. It's all here for you.' She gestured towards the shed.

'No, I...' He held up his hands.
 'Come on, Tony. Don't be a child.'
 'I'm not being a child, Caroline.'
 'You're behaving very badly.' (94-5)

Here the narrative runs almost like a script, the pace accelerating as the characters bicker and act out their fractious relationship.

In shaping this fluid narrative mode, I have been able to cater to the needs of each story and each moment. It is a flexible style which at times allows scenes to run like drama, and at others takes the reader deep inside the character in order to create the ply of his/her internal life and reveal their history. While enabling me to deepen characterization naturalistically, this method also allows me to control narrative pace, with fast moving dialogue scenes interspersed with slower, more reflective private moments. However, I have consistently kept authorial presence minimal, so that the action, be it external or internal, always remains in sharp focus. Thus, rather than stories being my own 'personal performance' (Pritchett in Current-Garcia 1974: 117), I have aimed to allow characters to perform for themselves.

As I developed this dramatic, slice-of-life style, I wanted the stories to flow, scene on scene. To achieve this, however, compression and judicious omission were necessary.

Taking 'A Planted Flag' (170-194) as an example, it is possible to see this in action. Although the first five scenes cover twenty four hours of narrative time, the reader is presented with only a sequence of slim glimpses from Sheila's life, a series of dramatic fragments that seem to slip along in an apparently continuous present. The scenes, however, are separated by elliptical, filmic cuts which subtly suggest passing time without the need to express it. Scene 1 ends with Sheila leaving Mrs Bennett's house, Scene 2 begins

with Sheila back at home. Scene 2 ends just after Sheila has extracted a 'gelid sachet of cod-in-butter sauce' (173) from the freezer, Scene 3 then begins 'Sheila forked in a mouthful of rice, her eyes fixed on the [television] screen' (173) she had switched on in Scene 2. And on it runs, the short, compact scenes creating sufficient narrative pace to carry the reader into the heart of the story, whilst also incrementally building a picture of the character's life.

To make the drama flow, I have imposed a strict economy, consistently trimming away unnecessary time or action, and omitting summary so that only telling moments are revealed. The intention has been to make the story fluent and immediate, so it skips from 'live' moment to 'live' moment. For instance, the omission, the narrative gap between extracting the sachet from the freezer and eating, suggests the cooking process has occurred.

Whilst I have often made the cuts expressive, suggesting what has been excised, I have also used them to generate meaning. In 'We Need to Talk,' for example, a strategic cut is used to colour character. After an extended scene of dialogue in which Tony has unsuccessfully tried to end his relationship with Caroline, omission shapes implication.

He was still shaking his head when she moved her hand onto his thigh.
 'Let's not fight, Tony. I thought we were good together. We have fun, don't we?'
 'I wouldn't call it fun, exactly.'
 'You do still find me attractive, don't you?' (103)

The next scene then begins:

He was woken by a soft nuzzle against his ear[...] For a moment he kept his eyes closed, recalling where he was. He could feel Caroline beside him. (103)

After failing to split up with Caroline, he has ended up in bed with her. The cut is designed to contribute to the drama. It is used to signify the end of Tony's resistance; the fade in to the next scene, with Tony in bed with Caroline, suggesting, with wry understatement, that Tony is weak-willed yet sexually opportunistic. Moreover, the

omission of a coital episode has once more allowed the drama to run on, to flow, leading to the next meaningful dramatic moment. With such cuts between scenes, I have shaped the drama so that the rising tension of the argument scene is abbreviated by the break, then the drama of the next scene starts slowly and rises once more towards the dénouement. This technique has been used across the stories, so that narratives build momentum, and dynamics are created. In some places, cuts between scenes are staccato, in others they are softer. Yet always, they shape the internal rhythm of the story, whilst simultaneously making the narrative taught.

Accordingly, omission and compression were vital in making these stories work, not only to make them short, but also to help them run fluently and dramatically. Through omission, I found I could make the stories sharper, more dynamic, more understated, more effective. Furthermore, with these omissions compressing the narrative, stories could unfold over a longer narrative time, so they were less limited in their scope and could cover several days, months or even years.

This then enabled the stories to portray more than just a brief moment, a narrow fragment from a character's life, and allowed me to explore the nature of a character's existence more expansively. To achieve this, however, I realized that the moments represented, the stacked scenes, must build to cumulatively convey the 'life' being lived.

Returning to the first five scenes in 'A Planted Flag,' it becomes evident how this was achieved. Although the nature of Sheila's existence is outlined, nothing is explicitly explained. The first scene sets into motion the motor that will drive the rest of the story, Sheila's effort to buy a house. The next three scenes then flesh out the nature of Sheila's quotidian 'reality'. She is living alone in a 'stark, lifeless' (172) flat, eating in front of the

television. The fact that she eats the same meal, 'cod-in-butter sauce' night after night, comes through a phone conversation with her mother, 'Not those cod things again' (174). Rather than describe Sheila's existence through authorial intrusion, the picture of her life is being built obliquely, dramatically.

The fourth scene, the next morning, shows Sheila working in the shop. Her recall of earlier that day reveals the subplot of her manager ordering her to wear a Santa hat. Then, when a young woman enters the shop pushing a 'wailing' (176) child in a pram, the scene also shows how Sheila's 'cavernous sadness' opens as she considers how it is 'too late' for her to have children. The reason is supplied by an analeptic shard as she remembers how her husband used to say, 'I can't commit to that sort of responsibility' (186), the brief glimpse of submerged fabula enriching Sheila's history.

Everything is revealed through character and situation; everything is emanating naturally from the scene in which the character finds herself. Even the glimpse of her husband's character is triggered by an external, incidental action, with Sheila's response, her interiority, deepening her character as her regret and sorrow are suggested.

These first scenes, through their deliberately patterned drama, economically show the nature of Sheila's present: she is bored, frustrated, isolated, trying to rebuild her life and identity; attempting to plant a flag by buying a house. But she is also shown to be grieving for the loss of her marriage, her former life, for lost time and the lost opportunity of having children. When, in the fifth scene the exposition, withheld to maintain reader interest, does arrive, it comes through dialogue with Sheila's oral narrative. And so her past, how her husband cheated on her, how the marriage fractured, is delivered through naturally occurring means, within the flow of drama. In these five scenes, from the story's beginning

to Sheila's second house viewing, the nature of her life, present and past is given, incrementally accumulating through suggestive fragments, with the meaning always held implicit for the reader to unearth.

The stories achieve character depth through implied fabula in diverse ways, yet it is present in all the pieces. It was an aspect necessary for this project's stories, as I wanted the characters to be rounded, full, with a history showing they were the products of a life lived. As I worked on the stories, however, I realized that the nature of a character's existence was not shaped solely by what had happened to him/her in the past, or in the present. To give the three-dimensional solidity to the slices of life this project required, I felt I needed to show the nature of the town and the society in which the characters lived. To do this I had to populate the story-world.

During my critical research, I had noticed how Hemingway, Mansfield, Chekhov and Simpson had included incidental scenes and bit-part characters in their narratives to enhance meaning and dramatic texture. Hemingway, in 'The Killers' used Mrs Bell to highlight the injustice of Ole's fate; Mansfield, in 'Marriage à la Mode' used the 'red faced,' 'Hysterical!' girl at the station to suggest William's judgmental attitude. Whilst generating meaning these bit-part players also add dimension to the story-world the characters inhabit.

As we've just seen in 'A Planted Flag,' with the woman and the wailing child in the shop, it is a technique I have used in my own way to deepen meaning, filling in a shred of the past, as well as to suggest the spontaneity of existence, the character responding to the world around him/her.

However, whereas Chekhov, Hemingway and Mansfield had used one or two incidental scenes or characters in a story, I have used them more extensively. In 'A Planted Flag' alone there are nine or ten bit-part players, or extras. There is Sheila's mother; old George, a customer; the builders in the shop; the woman to whom Helen gossips about the alcoholic postman; Dave; Will, the young shop worker wearing flashing antlers; Darren, the estate agent, not to mention Mrs Bennett.

Each character is a miniature portrait intended to sketch another slice-of-life: Dave suggesting the difficulty some have in obtaining housing; George showing the effects of bereavement. Each is a functioning component in Sheila's narrative, colouring meaning, adding depth and texture to her characterization. Her jaded weariness is highlighted by carefree Will, her relative security emphasized by Dave's living in a caravan, and George echoes her feeling of loss after divorce. And yet, whilst these characters are layered into the narrative to augment the implicit meaning and nuance beneath the dramatic surface, they also create the breadth of life in the story-world, the social context in which the protagonist lives. These are the lives in the social landscape, figures that evoke the nature of the town.

It was a technique developed over the course of the project as a means to represent the town and its society. It signifies the type of story I was trying to create, stories that teem with life. In crafting this story style, I have steered away from Elizabeth Bowen's notion of the short story as a 'snapshot' (Bowen 1986: 99). With the inclusion of all these 'extras', I have endeavoured to make the narratives sprawl beyond the snapshot's limiting frame so that they become more filmic, granting glimpses into myriad existences, enhancing the representation of the town whilst simultaneously deepening the portrayal of character and building meaning. Always, though, these extras and incidentals had to occur naturally, as

organic components of the story-world, so that whilst obliquely generating meaning they also functioned to make the stories feel raggedly alive. Always, though, when adding these incidental scenes, it was essential that inclusion was predicated by relevance. Every aspect of the story had to contribute to the overall effect or meaning. After all, due to its brevity, there is no space in the short story for unnecessary excess.

Already we have seen how the stories have been crafted with economy at their heart. The beginning sets the story in motion and provides a context for the action. The drama then flows fluently, feeding forward, building sub-textual meaning, with the protagonists' present revealed, their pasts implied, and incidental characters or scenes adding texture and nuance. And yet always the stories are driving towards their imminent endings.

In 'A Planted Flag' we see that Sheila is recently divorced, living alone, working an irritating job, and that she equates buying a house with rebuilding her life, re-establishing her place in the world. The story tells of how Sheila places an offer on the house, then how Mrs Bennett withdraws the house from the market, thwarting Sheila's need. Against this is mapped the sub-plot of Sheila's manager trying to force her to wear a Santa hat. These twin plot strands have been shaped to not only imply Sheila's anger and sense of injustice, but also to converge at the story's end, to deliver her epiphany, so that when she is disappointed by the failed house purchase, she throws off her Santa hat, quits her job and walks out of the shop, deciding to 'take some time, make some choices, some changes' (193).

Although the narrative structure has been made to feel loose and spontaneous, with its bit-part players and incidental moments, all the strands, all the scenes, from the initial

house viewing onward, have been tightly patterned to lead to this ending. And yet the ending is inconclusive, resistant to closure. We do not know what Sheila will do, only that she will do something. Her life, this story, continues beyond the limit of the text. How it will develop, we do not know. What choices or changes she will make, we so not see. The open ending suggests a future, effectively framing the beginning of another story. But more than this, in conjunction with the narrative structure, it serves to open questions: Is Sheila right to walk out? Is she a little too full of self-pity? Is she the victim of other people's selfishness, or has she made herself a victim? Has she asserted identity or divested herself of it? The onus of interpretation is handed to the reader.

'A Planted Flag,' is not the only story in the cycle that metonymically suggests the character's whole life, with past, present and implied future. To achieve this, these slices-of-life are shaped to represent moments of choice or change. However, we do not necessarily see how the changes pan out, the stories merely acknowledge that a tipping point has been reached. By ending the stories with a lack of resolution, I have tried to suggest that the characters' lives run on, continuing past the end of the story, as they move into the next stage of their existence. In this way, I felt I could create the impression that the characters continued to populate the town, their lives still unfolding, whilst other stories were told. Thus, Simon and Ingrid in 'Right to Protest' are still negotiating their marriage and planning issues as the action of 'The Soloist' unfolds; George, from 'The Things We Should've Done', is still resisting a care home, still rebuilding his relationship with his daughter as 'We Need to Talk' begins.

While giving the protagonists' whole lives, and suggesting futures, the stories are also shaped to enable deeper levels of implication: political, social and philosophical. Like 'A

Planted Flag,' 'Falling Through the Cracks' asks questions about the notion of home and belonging. The drama is deliberately patterned and an open ending deployed to achieve just this. By showing Tom twice rejected by Eric, his mother's boyfriend, once through the memory of how Eric had forced him out of the family home, then again through action as Tom goes to tell his mum that he has been accepted to university but is turned away, we see how Tom has become home-less. This is layered against his impressionistic recall of the other places he has recently stayed, with addicts, alcoholics and the threatening Dado, none of which has been home. However, against this sequence of rejections, the open ending, with its suggestion of a brighter future, portrays Tom on the brink of discovering belonging when his Chinese housemates show him kindness and acceptance. The combination of structure and content, the patterned drama and bit part players, in conjunction with the inconclusive ending form the question: What is home? Is it where your family reside, or where you are accepted?

More than this, however, the story interrogates social issues. Through Tom's story, with the bit-part players in his memories providing compressed social context, we see a societal underbelly, where addiction and violence exist. This is the world which, as a consequence of his homelessness, Tom has been forced to navigate. Moreover, as the landlord, immersed in his own problems, ignores Tom, and Tom feels invisible, the drama shows the effects his situation is having on him; he feels marginalized, his validity diminished. While this section of the story is staged to highlight the vulnerability of young homeless people, the landlord's blinding self-absorption suggests that we, in British society, do not care enough for the vulnerable who have nowhere to live. This suggestion is emphasized by the fact that the only kindness Tom receives is from another marginalized

social group, the story's Chinese immigrants. By mapping the content and drama in this way, the story raises awareness of a social issue, youth homelessness, and asks the reader: Can it be right that this is happening in our society today?

Although these are, superficially at least, slices of life, the stories are consistently engaging with the project's aim to represent and interrogate the town's society from a variety of angles. 'Right to Protest,' for instance, tells the story of a middle-class couple, Simon and Ingrid, who argue over a planned housing development at the top of their road. Simon wants to stop the development, but Ingrid, a newly elected District Councillor wants it to go ahead, so that her nascent political career isn't damaged. Again the story is told dramatically, with impressionistic techniques and a cast of bit-part players. Again the nature of the characters' lives and milieu is outlined with home, work and social context.

Like many of the stories, 'Right to Protest' is constructed to open layers of potential meaning. On the surface the story is about Ingrid. After the compromises of motherhood and the negation of self, she is renegotiating her role, not only in the marriage, but in the world. The story is told from Simon's not altogether reliable point of view. Thus the story is about Simon's lack of understanding and resentment towards the changes Ingrid is undergoing. On the first level, therefore, the story enacts the male's lack of failure to comprehend female needs beyond patriarchal expectation.

However, there is another level of meaning, with the story symbolically staging the conflict between Simon (as stasis) and Ingrid (as progress) in relation to the town's development, as well as within their relationship. But the notion of progress, personal and political, is complicated by the presence of Brian Nash, another councillor, who signifies the corruption behind the development, a corruption with which Ingrid complies. Ultimately,

Simon accepts corrupt progress so his marriage will hang together. While the story questions the effects of the personal on the political, the notion of progress collapses into meaninglessness and absurdity. Thus the story stirs feminist, existential and socio-political undertows, yet turns the task of interpretation over to the reader by asking questions: Should Simon have opposed Ingrid's ambition? Was Ingrid right? Was progress rendered meaningless because it was corrupted? Again, the ending, in conjunction with the narrative layering, and the role played by bit-part players like Phil and Dr Hugh, Simon's fellow Nimbies, enables levels of meaning to reverberate out from the story.

In this way, I have designed stories that not only depict the lives in the fictive town's social landscape, but which also consistently interrogate life and society. The stories, however, did not arrive on the page fully formed. They were not plucked from the air as finished articles. Editing was a vital component in their creation, and has been one of the key skills honed over the course of the project. In fact, the editing process has taught me short story craft more than any how-to-write book. As I dug around in the texts and their structures, as I cut, rewrote and reshaped, the process showed me how fiction works.

As a rule, I tended to overwrite at first draft stage, after which the editing process moved through a number of phases. First came the cutting away of unnecessary scenes and the rough shaping of action. Then existing scenes were pared down to size, omitting unnecessary dialogue and action, so that a scene like,

'This can put me back on the map, Caroline. Reignite my career.'
 'Come on, Tony. A children's book? Grow up. You're 49.'
 'So?'
 'You're going to have to stop chasing those little dreams sometime.'
 'Dreams? I'm already a published author.'
 'Do you know how pompous you sound?'
 'Well, it's more than you.'
 'You're jealous, aren't you, Tony?'

'Jealous of what exactly?'

'Of my exhibition.'

'Hardly.'

'Well it seems to coincide a little too neatly, don't you think?'

'No.'

'I really think you need to grow up, Tony.'

He couldn't understand how it had turned like this.

'Look,' he said, 'I've got a lot of pressure riding on this. And I just think it'd be a bad time to move if it derails the project.'

'Pressure? Other people have pressure, Tony, and they just deal with it.' (Draft 1b p.23)

became,

Tony slouched back in his chair. 'This can put me back on the map, Caroline.'

'Grow up, Tony. You're going to have to stop chasing your little dreams sometime.'

'I'm a published author.'

'Do you know how pompous you sound?'

'Look,' he said, 'I've got a lot of pressure riding on this...'

'Pressure? Everyone has pressure, Tony, and they just have to deal with it.' (101)

This stage involved deciding which aspects of character and drama to push, and which were superfluous, then trimming and shaping dialogue to put across characterization with an economy of implication. This trimming enabled the scene to flow and made it more punchy, as well as contributing to the story's compression. Next there was the rewriting and crafting of scenes' beginnings and endings. As I refined the scenes' dramatic effect, I ensured all the dialogue and free indirect was characteristic and credible, checked that physical action was expressive, and movement around the scene appropriate. Throughout, I was tightening sentences, making sure concrete detail was evocative whilst cutting away needless description to make the narrative taut.

The bus cut bluntly through the countryside, warm air wafting in through the opened windows. Tony listened to the conversation of a group of kids roll forward from the back seat[...]Tony always sat on the upper deck, watching the countryside pass, the hedgerow-threaded pastureland, rolling out towards the horizon on either side of the road. (Draft 1b p.1)

Tony sat on the upper deck of the bus, watching the sun-gilded fields roll off to the horizon. Warm, wheat-smelling air ruffled in through the open windows, chatter swept forward from the college kids on the back seats. (81)

After sifting through the story, honing language and compressing sentences, I combed the text for actions, sentences and dialogue that would make the narrative flow stutter, and thus jolt the reader from the 'fictional dream' (Gardner 1991: 32). Often, by the time the rewriting, editing and polishing were finished, the focus of the story might have ended up being quite different from the original intention. It was usually a matter of working at a story until it delivered successfully. This often took up to twenty drafts.

There were also some pieces which, having returned to them after two years of research and writing, I realized had to be completely rewritten. Only elements of the originals now remain. 'Right to Protest' is one of those stories. On re-reading, the original felt flat; my style and technique had, over time, improved, so that the earlier stories seemed weak by comparison to those written later in the process. The rewriting and editing had to stop at some point though, otherwise the project would never have been finished. With editing, I always found it difficult to know when a story was finished. I just tended to stop when I had pushed a comma around or changed a word a few times, then realized that it had ended up in the same place or was what it had been before the neurotic faffing took hold.

Ultimately, I have tried to view editing like sculpture, chipping away until the figure that was always in the block of marble reveals itself. The editing process is where a story becomes what it needs to be, where the writer can exact his or her own aesthetic. It is through editing that the writer can attain the brevity, the compressed precision which makes short stories come alive. For me, it is a fundamental aspect of writing short stories.

During the editing process, through grubbing around in the fundamentals of narrative, I realized that the compression of a story was not only achieved through the

omission of surplus scenes and excess dialogue, or by using chronological ellipses, but could also be effected by the successful handling of concrete detail. It was only through writing and editing practice that I came to understand that concrete detail had an equally important part to play.

Research had revealed how specific concrete detail is essential to the construction of story-worlds and for the reader's interpretative process. However, I felt it necessary not to clog the narrative with description. I wanted the narratives to be clipped, spare and fast-flowing in order to enhance the drama-like quality of the stories. For this reason, I omitted swathes of description which would choke the flow of movement. Instead, I have, as a rule, given just enough detail to evoke setting.

She looked along the clubhouse; the dull daylight sheened on the laminated table tops in the dining area. 'It's better than the retirement home anyway.'
Victor drank again; the wine fridge shuddered. She gazed out through the slats of the Venetian blind. The trees lining the first fairway were swaying sedately in the soft May breeze. (107)

The description draws the image of the golf club's clubhouse interior, establishing the stable spatial framework around which the characters will move during the rest of the story. It establishes the bar, the dining room, and outside the clubhouse, the car park on one side, the leafy golf course with its 'swaying' trees on the other. Although I rely, to some degree, on the reader filling in the gaps, knowing what a bar is like, necessary particularity is still given through detail to conjure vivid images in the reader's mind.

In the above example, the detail arrives discreetly, by accretion, filtered through Heather's sense perceptions; we see what she sees. This, by and large, has been a natural limiter within the stories: only details that the protagonist can see, hear, smell, touch have been included. Equally, details are wrapped around the characters' actions, as when Victor

flees on Barbara's return, 'The door clumped shut as he hopped down from the patio and onto the path beside the putting green' (108). Elsewhere, they filter through the character's thoughts, 'The red brick retirement home would have been a vast Victorian home once' (88). Often, the style blends methods to sneak in detail.

She carried the pile of folded tablecloths into the dining room of the retirement home. It was all so beige. Beige curtains, beige carpets, beige everything. Music seeped through from the day room; there were voices, laughter. Armchair aerobics. She dropped the tablecloths onto the chair, peeled off the top one, shook out the folds. (112)

In this example the description is firstly wrapped around action, then filtered through represented thought. Next it arrives aurally through Heather's senses, and finally, objectively again, through action. It is even used to give characterization with Heather's critical 'beige' verdict.

Rather than something one awkwardly includes to evoke verisimilitude, I have tried to make detail an integral and naturally occurring component of the story. Always the balancing act has been to include enough detail to vividly conjure the story-world in the reader's mind, whilst not cluttering the narrative or slowing the story with pictorial descriptive pauses that step outside narrative time.

In keeping with the stringent economy I have exacted on the short story, concrete detail is also used to signify more than simply what is there. Where possible I have freighted it with implication. In 'Right to Protest,' for instance, Simon walks into the kitchen and surveys the 'polished granite work surfaces, the breakfast bar, the brushed steel extractor cowl. It had all been new six months ago' (6).

At one level, the attention to detail gives particularity in order to direct the reader's visual imagination. Yet there are additional levels of compressed, implicit meaning. The

evident expense of the kitchen tells of the characters' affluence, whilst also invoking irony when stacked against the fact that Ingrid is in the process of shedding her former domesticity as she morphs out of her motherhood role.

In 'We Need to Talk,' as Tony looks at Caroline's self-crafted objet d'art, we gain a sense of his critical judgement of her and her work. This has been achieved by filtering description through his thoughts and senses, and wrapping a memory around it.

On top of the gas-fuelled faux log burner, in pride of place, was one of her 'architectural pieces', a dirty green lozenge-shaped hunk of glass. A crack ran out from its centre, widened to a vast gap at the edge.

'Form over function, Tony,' she'd calmly explained when he'd asked whether the crack had been intentional. 'The kiln does its work,' she'd added gnomically. (85)

In 'The Soloist,' detail is used to foreshadow Ted's mental turmoil, whilst giving specificity to the scene.

A passing bus blocked the light for a moment, caused the water in his glass to ripple. Odd seeing Frank again... (26)

I have used concrete detail as a vital component in the compression of narratives by making it serve the short story's need for an economy of implication. Although the detail may be minimal, delivered surreptitiously through characters' sense perceptions and thoughts or wrapped around their actions, it is multivalent, adding to characterization, generating tone and implicit meaning. By delivering it in this way, it has become an integral part of the stories, part of their unified whole, whilst also playing a vital role in conjuring the story-world. Indeed, the evocation of place has been essential in creating the story cycle's fictional town.

As I developed the stories, it was an intentional choice to have the characters moving around a town, showing its different aspects. Initially, this decision was inspired by

James Joyce with his *Dubliners* [1914], and the way he showed a range of life and settings. However, I wasn't entirely sure how this was going to work in my own cycle. As I wrote some of the earliest stories, 'Falling Through the Cracks,' an early draft of 'Right to Protest,' and 'A Planted Flag,' this became clearer.

Originally, these were to be domestic dramas examining the notion of home and belonging however, I soon realized that the stories were too static, too contained. I decided, therefore, that the characters should be more active. By moving them around different areas of the town as a natural part of the drama, as well as showing them within their home environment, I could craft stories and characters that had the appearance of being more fully realized, with both social and private dimensions. Moreover, by moving the characters around the streets, I could portray the town more extensively, giving the story-world greater substance and detail. This would then allow the lives to occur within a verisimilar landscape, which would in turn augment the sense of realism across the cycle. In order to develop dimension in the cycle's portrayal of Sudleigh, deciding which aspects of the town to reveal became a conscious part of story design.

To construct the town fully on the page, and across the cycle, it has been necessary to use a real town as a point of reference. Although the town's name has been fictionalized, I have used the street layout and exact topography of a real place, Alton, a town in Hampshire. I have, however, chosen to protect the identity of Alton, specifying only that it was a town forty minutes outside of Surbiton by train. This then opens the possible whereabouts of the town to a broad range of Surrey and Hampshire, with the trains out of Waterloo servicing that area.

To coin the fictitious name for Alton, I joined the French name for south, 'sud' with 'leigh', the Middle English word for clearing or open ground. Given that Winchester, some twelve miles away, was the Norman capital of England, and evidence of Norman influence remains in Alton's 'Normandy Street,' (commemorating the 1101 'Treaty of Alton') plus the fact that there is open, grazing land all around, the name Sudleigh seemed appropriate. It is also in keeping with other place names in Hampshire such as Eastleigh.

The real Alton, on which my fictional town of Sudleigh is based, is an old semi-rural middle England market town of around 18,000 people, not too small and not too large, with a 95.8% white population⁸. I lived there for three years, in four different house-shares, after moving down from Edinburgh. At the end of a train line out of Waterloo, and with no onward destination, it seemed, to my outsider's eye at least, to be a place stuck in time. It was an old semi-rural market town which no longer served the farming community as once it did; there was little work there, so people commuted to London, Basingstoke, Winchester or Southampton. Business premises stood empty on the high street, and yet Alton was growing as a glut of new housing sprang up. With its old identity being hollowed out, the town was undergoing change, though it didn't seem to know what it wanted to become. I was also struck by the social disparity in the town. It was a place of conspicuous affluence, with a stridently corduroyed upper middle class, designer-labelled London commuters, and people who arrived in town straight from the stable or paddock wearing riding boots to go to Specsavers for an eye-test. There were also those who had built their lives and businesses locally over decades, becoming part of the established order, personalities in the community. Then there were addicts, the homeless and layers of poverty.

⁸ Information from www.citypopulation.de/php/uk-england-southeastengland.php?cityid

With such a broad spectrum of society contained in the one reasonably small place, I felt this was an ideal setting for a short story cycle. Moreover, the town centre was effectively one street straight through the heart of town, with a couple of roads leading off. Characters could credibly walk from one end of town to another in a short space of time. Residential properties ranged out from the centre, the more expensive housing situated towards the town's fringes and beyond, where the countryside took over. This compactness was perfectly suited to what I needed. I could, perhaps, have invented a town for the story cycle, but I felt that using a real town as a reference point, and borrowing its topography, would present an easier prospect in terms of creating a stable story-world which I could keep constant throughout. I could also wander the streets and get a feel of them, enabling me to render the story-world more fully, with detailed specificity. This would then help me achieve the verisimilitude required for the reader to create Sudleigh in his/her mind.

As the characters transport us around their narratives, therefore, the town is revealed. Tom introduces us to the top end of Sudleigh, his lonely wanderings carrying him from work to digs and up to his former house, taking us past a primary school and the flea-pit cinema. Simon, the epitome of the middle-class professional, rides his bike along and through the fringe between his affluent neighbourhood and the country, where the fields have already been cleared for the proposed development. Newly-divorced Sheila works in a town centre shop and traverses the lower end of town looking for somewhere to put down new roots. 'Geoff the Snake,' lives beyond the town's fringes, in his own wealthy netherworld; Joe, in 'What's Wrong with Carpets?' lives on a council estate, a poorer region, and so on into shared housing, near the train station. The characters all live in locations appropriate to their finances, the settings rendered realistically. Across the stories, the town

is consistently and extensively explored, with different places and different social strata expanding the story-world.

The characters also take us into pubs, golf clubs, retirement homes, warehouses, carpet shops, mini-markets, guest houses, and in between, carrying us past supermarkets, along the high street, past a Boots store, a greengrocer's, past banks and a police station, past churches, kebab houses and greens. Thus, the town is constructed across all the pieces, the story-world gradually built and expanded as the cycle progresses. A sense of shared space is then emphasized as characters like Tom from 'Falling,' and Joe from 'Carpets' pass and look at the same church; Tony from 'We Need to Talk,' and Ted from 'The Soloist' walk the same high street, though Ted considers how things in town had changed with the coffee shops and charity shops, whilst Tony contemplates lost chances. The shared topography, with the characters seeing the same landmarks or walking the same streets, links the stories and makes the cycle cohere. Strategically, however, the characters rarely meet; they live very separately, without intersection, each existing in their own lives and their own social stratum. The stories, with their portrayal of separate lives and different realities within this shared space, thus come to enact atomization and social stratification.

However, the stories do not just feature the protagonists and antagonists. These stories feature, as previously discussed, a host of other bit-part players. And these, cumulatively, in conjunction with the major characters, create the social nature of the town. There are menial workers and professionals, young people and old, those who have a sense of belonging and connection, those who are isolated; there are married couples, the recently divorced, the bereaved and the singletons; there are families that function, families that have fractured, and those about to start families; there are homeowners, those in

house shares; there are those with choices and those without; there is poverty and plenty; there is security and lack of opportunity; there are middle classes, working classes, those who have fallen through the cracks; there are natives and there are immigrants.

The people, therefore, are intended to represent aspects of the town's society. Indeed, there were some characters purposefully added at later draft stages of stories in order to shape social depth and imply social issues. People like Dave, from 'A Planted Flag,' and Kate, the addict from 'Falling Through the Cracks' were included this way, to introduce a sharper, harsher side of society.

Throughout the writing process, I was always aware that the pieces were to be formed into a cycle. For this reason I read and researched a variety of short story cycles; cycles that were place linked, theme linked and character linked. Pat Barker's *Union Street* (1982) provided me with a starting model to work with. The seven stories in her cycle were linked at three levels: the overarching themes of poverty and female experience; geographical unity, in that all the characters lived on the same street; the connection of characters, with, for example, Iris King, leaking across stories and turning up in other people's narratives. This was close to what I wanted to achieve. However, I also liked the way Joyce's characters in *Dubliners* ranged further afield, across the city, rather than being situated on just one street. I also preferred the diversity of characters that Joyce exploited, his breadth of subject matter, over Barker's choice to portray lives of a uniform class with their similarly graphic hardships.

With this in mind, I elected to weld both techniques together and then morph the form to suit my own needs. In other words, I did it my own way, although Joyce and Barker's models informed my thinking.

I decided I would use links of theme, place and character, but do this subtly. Each story would link with others, often several others, so that all the stories, even if at one or two removes, were in some way connected. This I felt could then be representative of both the cohesion and fragmentation in society, whilst gently unifying the stories.

The links between stories, however, are often so slight as to be barely perceptible. The stories overlap geographically, characters treading the same streets, sharing topography: Joe in 'Carpets' walks past the same church that Tom in 'Falling' stares up at. Tony from 'We Need to Talk' walks the same streets as Ted in 'The Soloist', albeit at different times. Simon in 'Right to Protest' rides out on his bike past the golf club in 'Curious the Circle.' Bit-part players leak across stories, and major characters from one story become bit-part players in others: Frank from 'The Soloist' turns up in the golf club and also in 'Carpets' as the uncle of the protagonist; Mrs Bennett from 'A Planted Flag' phones Frank in 'The Soloist' to enquire about carpets. Caroline from 'We Need to Talk' announces she is going for a meal with Susan from 'Geoff the Snake,' and Geoff, post-metamorphosis, is reportedly sighted by Dave, lurking under his caravan in 'A Planted Flag.' Phil, a Nimby from 'Right to Protest' turns up in 'It's Family.' There are many other small links that the attentive reader will notice. This then works to generate the sense of place, the sense of lives lived in proximity.

Place, however, functions at a further level. Despite the town bearing a fictional name, like John Cheever's 'Shady Hill,' it is a place closely linked to reality by accurate topographical details, as well as references to the real world with the train outside Surbiton, Brexit, Co-op, Freedom of Information requests, etc. The story cycle, therefore, purposefully draws its point of reference from the real world. By setting the stories in a credible town in

the commuter belt west of London, at a specified time (2016), the town would then provide the background context against which I could generate my own socio-political implications.

I had never wanted the stories merely to entertain; my urge, like Joyce's before me, was to hold up a mirror to society, to reflect life as it is and interrogate it. Stories, therefore, have been structured in specific ways, the endings left open and inconclusive, authorial judgment withheld and the content particularly designed so that layers of implication can be invoked. Through the confluence of character, action and structure set in a specific place at a specific time, I have aimed to access the socio-political through the personal. To facilitate this, the choice of setting was deliberate. By siting the selected slices-of-life in the affluent commuter belt which girdles London, I intended to explore and interrogate the inequalities and fragmentation currently at play within contemporary British society.

Three of the stories, 'Falling Through the Cracks,' 'Curious the Circle that Turns,' and 'What's Wrong with Carpets' feature young protagonists, aged between 18 and 30. These protagonists and the choices they face, along with the worlds they inhabit, represent and question some of the socio-economic issues young people face today.

As previously mentioned, 'Falling Through the Cracks' enacts the effects of youth homelessness on a vulnerable individual, showing how such people can become 'invisible.' Initially, the story was inspired by an article on Shelter's website (Shelter 2015: 1-8) which explained how many young people, aged 17-18, if forced from home, regardless of reason, often find difficulty accessing financial and housing assistance from government services. Too old to be helped as children, too young to be helped as adults, these youngsters are known to fall through the cracks of the welfare system. All too often they end up homeless, sofa-surfing or worse. This situation can lead to a negative spiral, with youngsters dropping

out of education and experiencing difficulty in finding work, thereby limiting their future life chances.

However, these stories aim to function at several levels at once. While the narrative bears witness to a failure of the welfare system to protect people such as Tom, the story also represents the harsh reality Tom has been forced to navigate; a world of addiction and violence, with Kate the addict, an off-stage alcoholic shelf-stacker, and knife-sharpening Dado. Hence, the story also reveals that the narrative world, like the real world, is not wholly benevolent, and that there are strata of dysfunction beneath the smooth, affluent middle-class surface. In addition, Tom, at the low end of the pay-scale, living in shared accommodation, demonstrates how the less well-off do not have the option of comfortable housing, and that homeownership is out of reach for many social groups. Although Tom has the opportunity of a potentially different future with his acceptance to university, for many this is not the case.

The story's socio-political undercurrents do not end there. Even the kindness Tom receives from his Chinese housemates is loaded with implication. Set in 2016, the story's submerged though implicit context is the toxic rhetoric surrounding the Brexit debate. The kindness of the 'othered' social group of Chinese immigrants and students, when his own society, as figured by Eric and the pub landlord, reject him, is consequently a quiet act of resistance to the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the Leave campaign.

Layered with socio-political meanings, the stories not only bear witness to society, but also perform acts of resistance, pass comments, ask questions and satirize. Yet they never do so openly. The comments and questions remain buried beneath the text, the meanings ready to be unearthed if the reader wishes to dig beneath the surface.

Heather in 'Curious the Circle that Turns,' like Tom, is also working in a low-paid job; she too is in shared accommodation. Heather, however, is a very different character.

'Curious the Circle' works as a satire on the effects of neo-liberal policies which have, over the last 35 years or so, encouraged a ruthless individualism by setting people in mutual competition. As Margaret Thatcher once stated, 'There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families' (Thatcher 1987: 9). Such policies have encouraged an 'out for yourself' mind-set, which, as many experts, such as Zygmunt Bauman and Neal Lawson (2009), have noted, has contributed to a 'withdrawal of society' (Bauman 2009: 147), a breakdown of human solidarity, as the individual becomes of primary importance.

This condition could be seen to have intensified with the current socio-economic climate in which there are fewer secure opportunities, so that there is an apparent need for people to be more selfishly ambitious. Sharp-elbowed Heather, as she engineers Tom's sacking and then stabs Barbara in the back, is shown to be almost callously individualistic, 'It was a shame for Tom, but what could she do?' (111). And yet Heather does have a softer side, she is compassionate to Eileen, the weepy old lady in the retirement home. However, as she later acknowledges when she's alone in her rented room, working her third job so she can save enough money to rent a flat of her own, 'It was a shame for him [Tom] but a flat was going to cost her £700 a month. There were bills on top of that [...] No, she had to do what she had to do' (115-6). She sees no real alternative but to behave as she does.

Rather than being an indictment of young people or of ambition, however, the story is intended to question the effects of the current economic climate, the cost of housing and neo-liberal policies, and highlight the fact that, when a society no longer provides

opportunity and there is less social mobility available, individuals will become more brutally and damagingly ambitious. Like 'Falling Through the Cracks,' the story again uses the representation of an unfashionable, often unreported young working or lower-middle-class character in order to demonstrate the difficulties young people are experiencing in terms of career, housing and their deficit of social equity.

'What's Wrong with Carpets?' again extends this aspect of the cycle's town. Joe is also working for minimum wage, although he had previously been a chef. He lost his job when the restaurant where he worked went bankrupt. Through the bit-part players in the pub, we learn that other businesses are failing, shutting down because there are no longer profits enough to survive. Again the story reveals the tighter financial situation faced by young people. Like the other younger characters, Joe is caught in the rent-trap cycle, his opportunities circumscribed by the current economic climate.

These three stories together signify how home-ownership, stable employment and the opportunity to progress are no longer available to the extent that once they were. However, Joe is fortunate. Unlike Heather and Tom, he is offered help by his uncle Frank, a symbol of the older generation's successes.

This cluster of stories bears witness to the times in which we live, the fraying edge of our society. They represent a young, disenfranchised, often ignored, working and lower middle class living in a world where the dream of homeownership has considerably receded, where people are caught in a rent trap and where, without long-term secure career prospects, the prospect of social mobility is considerably stifled. The stories are intended to capture a moment of flux in a country when the boom times seem to be over and the nation

teeters on the brink of decline. These issues, however, are never overtly discussed; rather their effects are enacted by the characters' lives.

Pitched against the younger characters' stories, with their lack of opportunity and security, are the older, middle-class characters of 'Right to Protest,' 'Geoff the Snake,' and 'We Need to Talk.' The divide between these two groups of stories is evident. In this cycle, none of the stories about middle-class life interconnects or overlaps with the stories of the working-class characters. Whilst this division is purposeful of itself, the stories also carry their own individual political meanings.

Set in a comfortable middle-class milieu, 'Right to Protest,' at one level, examines how the class segregation is enforced with Simon and the nimbyist protectionism of the Fight for Sudleigh group. In the first scene, as they discuss how best to prevent the planned development with its affordable housing at the top of their road, they dismissively refer to the potential new inhabitants, the less well off, as 'single mothers pushing prams...' assuming their presence will result in them 'degrading a respectable neighbourhood' (1). The group's ideals are selfish, as are Simon's; they evidence an 'us and them' mentality which persists in society and perpetuates division.

At another level, the story has a simple, satirical point. With Ingrid willing to accept corruption in order to further her nascent political career, the story asks whether Ingrid, as embodiment of the politician, serves herself or her society. Will the houses be built to meet the needs of the less advantaged or to fuel her private, personal ambition? Again, this aspect of the narrative supports the suggestion that the likes of Simon and Ingrid have little understanding of, or interest in, the needs of the less advantaged; rather, they act in order to maintain their own elevation and separation.

Beyond the fringes of the town, in the realm of even higher affluence than Simon and Ingrid, 'Geoff the Snake' takes the satire further, working at a metaphorical level. Geoff and Susan, a former Whitehall civil servant and an ex-ballerina who now run a guest house, are still further removed from the world which Tom, Heather and Joe inhabit. Utterly self-absorbed, they represent comfortable isolationism and mediocrity, and act as a counterpoint to the harsh realities of the young people's stories. The turn to the absurd, with Geoff's metamorphosis into the snake, satirically and symbolically signals the self-indulgent drift into irrelevance of those who insulate themselves from others, divorcing themselves from social responsibility. In another sense, they signify the difference between the young, local people, struggling to survive, and those who have made their money elsewhere and moved to the area for comfort and privacy.

'We Need to Talk' again explores the stagnation of an older, insulated middle class, with Caroline and Tony hardly brushing reality. The only evidence they do is undermined when Caroline, after telling Tony that she is going on a Labour party march, reveals she doesn't actually know what the march is about, and that she's only going there to network. Again, the middle-class characters, 'stick to their own,' with Caroline shown to be a friend of Susan, Geoff's wife. Cocooned within their class, both Tony and Caroline are secure and comfortable enough to afford themselves vacuous pretensions. Indeed, Tony's 'Jazz Cats' story demonstrates how he, like Geoff, has drifted off into fantastic nonsense. Once more, their reality is remote from the less advantaged, younger characters.

Other stories also make their points, contributing to the overall interrogation of society. 'A Planted Flag' and 'Things We Should've Done' for example examine loss and loneliness. George's widowed vulnerability demonstrates the isolating effect of

bereavement on many elderly people, whilst Sheila is seeking to reconstruct her place in the world after the collapse of her marriage. 'The Soloist' pitches Ted's selfish individualism and consequent isolation against Frank's forfeit of ambition for the sake of familial community and belonging. Thus the story works, symbolically, to assess the cycle's underpinning themes of fragmentation, cohesion and loss of identity whilst expanding the view of the town's population. 'It's Family' then echoes the cycle's recurring themes at a familial and interpersonal level, exploring the possibility that cohesion for cohesion's sake may be unhealthy, and that fragmentation, for some, can allow the possibility of happiness. By breaking free of the familial bonds (community) and the false judgments it projects, Sean is able to assert his own identity and find worth in belonging to the community of his choosing (Rachel).

While the cycle is bound and unified by characters, place, and theme, the stories are linked at further levels. Heather in 'Curious the Circle that Turns,' and Ingrid from 'Right to Protest' are connected by ruthless ambition. Both are strong women carving their niches in the world, yet they are from opposite ends of the class spectrum, each staring at different horizons. Diametrically opposed to these characters are Sheila from 'A Planted Flag' and George, both of whom are searching for meaning and identity after their former relational roles have been removed. Tom in 'Falling Through the Cracks' is linked to Sheila because they have both been denied familial security as a consequence of someone else's self-interest. Susan from 'Geoff the Snake' then stands in contrast as she is relieved and released by her husband's selfishness. The list of similarities and oppositions tying the pieces together is extensive.

Throughout the stories I have employed humour, finding it a useful tool in keeping the stories both entertaining and human. The blend of comedy and tragedy allowed me to craft the ply of ordinariness that is life, whilst also enabling me to engage with serious issues without the stories becoming drably melodramatic. Furthermore, it was a means of masking the socio-political content, so that the stories were not unbearably dull.

When the majority of the pieces were written, it was necessary to decide the order in which they would fit together. Their positioning within the cycle's constellation would, I understood, affect the reader's experience of the collection.

I had thought about the order of the stories as I wrote them and had roughly sequenced them so they spanned, chronologically, across the course of twelve months. I felt that chronological ordering would help to create a flow through the collection and create a subtle unifying momentum which might carry the reader along despite the lack of a binding narrative arc.

From this stage, certain stories were set into place by the time of year at which they occurred. 'It's Family,' was in the New Year, 'A Planted Flag' was just before. These pieces were bound in place as the final pair. 'Geoff the Snake' was set in autumn, to emphasize, seasonally, the declining marriage. 'We Need to Talk' and 'Curious the Circle' covered the summer months. Around these pillars, the other stories could then be jiggled into an effective order, the descriptions of weather, and the interconnections between stories being suitably retro-adjusted. Correct positioning, I felt, was also important to give balance, texture and rhythm to the cycle, so that slower, more emotive stories, like 'The Things We Should've Done' were offset by conjunction to quicker-paced, more humorous pieces like 'We Need to Talk.'

After a few trials, I decided on the order as is. Previously, 'What's Wrong with Carpets' was at slot 2, but this too closely mirrored the process of compromise occurring in 'Right to Protest' at slot 1. This caused a sense of repetition. Therefore, I replaced it with 'The Soloist,' which had previously been at slot 4. I then moved 'Carpets' to slot 8, so that after the selfishness and departure of 'Geoff,' it provided apposite contrast with its depiction of compromise for family reasons. This then complemented the movement of the following piece, 'A Planted Flag.' I then shifted 'The Things We Should've Done' into slot 4. Although I had to change a few details in 'The Soloist,' (Joe could no longer be working for Frank if he had not yet been offered a position), this was no great difficulty. The purpose of placing 'The Things We Should've Done' at slot 4 was to create a softer, more emotive feel, which would counterpoint Tom's final sense of belonging in 'Falling Through the Cracks.' With its assessment of the effects of bereavement on a family, and the renegotiation of relationships, 'The Things We Should've Done' slows the collection's pace before the comedy of 'We Need to Talk,' and creates a required tonal contrast between stories.

Whilst making the final decisions, it was important to think what note each story left the reader on, and how the next one began. The mood of the pieces, their tones had to complement one another so that the reading experience was varied, bringing the reader on a journey where emotion and tone did not become monotonous, but shifted and surprised from story to story. This sequencing exercise was necessary to form the cycle into an effective whole.

The stories, self-sufficient and interrelated, individually and in connection, form the fabric of existence in Sudleigh. They enact inequality, vulnerability, wealth and poverty, paralysis and corrupt progress, lack of opportunity and self-protective entitlement. The

distance between rich and poor, their lack of overlap, is used to suggest social stratification, the modular form being exploited to depict the isolated, dislocated individuals within a fragmented, atomized society, and the cycle functioning to embody and augment the cumulative meaning of the stories. Thus, as a whole, the cycle bears witness to society as it is today. For me, writing is a political act and my own political perspectives are inevitably part of what, and why I write. That being the case, I see this collection as a response, an act of resistance to the direction in which the country seems to be inexorably travelling.

Conclusion

Despite its diminutive size, its often elliptical, inconclusive nature, the modern realist short story is a form which, on many levels, punches above its weight. With the evocation of place playing a central role in its compression and in generating verisimilitude, the realist short story offers the writer the opportunity to craft glimpses of life, to render meaningful moments of represented reality. By shaping tightly framed points of change or transition, of flux in a character's life, and placing them under the short story's narrative microscope, the writer can explore the human condition and expose profundity in the mundane. Moreover, with the short story set in a 'real' place and representing a credible, plausible fragment of life, the writer can render freeze-framed moments representative of a point in the 'changing historical realities' (Williams 1975: 289) of society.

However, the realist short story can do more than merely represent a fictive version of reality. It is a form with which the writer can respond to society and engage with matters personal, social, political and existential.

We have seen, across the course of this project, how writers, using the socio-political context provided by place in time, in tandem with the form's traits and techniques, have employed the realist short story to not just bear witness, but to ask questions, to satirize, critique and construct comment on the issues central to their societies. This, in part, embodies the art of the realist short story. It is a form which allows the writer to catch hold of a piece of life, to polish that fragment so it refracts levels of implication, the short story's elliptical, inconclusive nature enabling meaning to resonate beyond the limit of the drama.

However, in order for short fiction to respond to society in a unique way, each writer of the short story must renew and rediscover the form. Indeed, it is a form which invites innovation, its natural restriction of brevity consistently requiring the writer to cheat its limit in order to make a short story as expressive as possible. Whether writers develop their own original voice or style, whether they extend the form's technical or formal capacity, whether they represent life as it is from a new angle, expose a rarely seen corner of existence, give voice to an often unrepresented social group, or interrogate the themes and issues central to their time, they must refresh the form in order to communicate their own vision of existence. As a result, the writer is able to represent and explore life in his/her own individual way. And in so doing, by finding their own way to use the short story to examine the human condition from their own perspective, writers can ensure the realist short story remains perennially relevant and continues to grant readers insight into life beyond the narrow margins of their own experience.

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