

limitations of short fiction

The Urth list — 5 messages, 3 voices, 25 Jun 2003

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 25 Jun 2003, 18:53

Sam Keyes wrote:

So maybe it's not that Wolfe is weaker in short stories,
but rather that short stories, formally, are usually weaker--or, I ought
to add, weaker at asking the questions and playing the games that Wolfe
likes to do, which are usually on a grand scale.

Now this is something I find interesting, and I don't recall it coming up before.

Yes, the limitations of the short form -- for example, it seems to be more or less impossible for any serious "world building" to be in a short story. There just isn't enough =room= and every word counts double. This means, I think, that short fiction often has "Hitchcock landscapes": if you show Mount Rushmore, then the protag is going to be in danger of falling off of it; if you show a field of corn, then that crop-duster biplane is going to threaten the protag. Everything in every scene is a loaded Chekov's Gun, and they all go off "sooner" rather than "later."

This is not to say that Gene Wolfe is interested in "world building," but this is a case I immediately thought of in terms of scale (short story versus novel). IIRC, in one of his essays on writing (in CASTLE OF DAYS, I think) Gene Wolfe has a line something like "if it is about a world, then it is a novel."

So if an sf short story has a "beanstalk" orbital elevator, then either the protag's car has to fall off of it (or threaten to fall off) or some terrorist has to break the "rail" it so it falls down and around the world in a RED MARS-style equatorial apocalypse.

What holds for the physical sciences also holds true for the soft sciences. Jack Vance's "The Moon Moth" is a classic of societal world-building, but alas, it is also a novelette (rather than a short story). Even so, I will continue: upon examination one sees how all the cultural stuff is given for the direct purpose of the story, which itself is pretty slight when shorn of all the Vancean detail.

Le Guin's "Semley's Necklace" (novelette? I don't know) does the neat trick of telling a story of two worlds and four or more cultures with virtually no "world-building": she does it by using only off-the-shelf stuff, in a clever way. Shorn of details, the story itself is pretty slight, as in the case of "Moon Moth," but from a completely different approach.

Just a few thoughts.

=mantis=

Richard Horton — 27 Jun 2003, 13:12 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

On Wed, 25 Jun 2003 11:53:55 -0700, you wrote:

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trick of telling a story of two worlds and four or more cultures with virtually no "world-building": she does it by using only off-the-shelf stuff, in a clever way. Shorn of details, the story itself is pretty slight, as in the case of "Moon Moth," but from a completely different approach.

"Semley's Necklace" is just barely a novelette, at some 7700 words -- but I don't think parsing short story/novelette distinctions at that level is useful.

One of the neat things about "Semley's Necklace" is that the "off-the-shelf" stuff includes fantasy conventions such as fairies and trolls. It's an old trick to give those science fictional rationales, but Le Guin does so very gracefully, and the story turns on a particular fairy legend, given physical possibility by scientific means, and it does so very nicely. (All of the novel (_Rocannon's World_) expanded from "Semley's Necklace" is the same sort of thing, and it remains slight but graceful and enjoyable. And beautifully written.)

--=20

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 27 Jun 2003, 19:54 · follows Richard Horton

Rich Horton wrote:

"Semley's Necklace" is just barely a novelette, at some 7700 words -- but I don't think parsing short story/novelette distinctions at that level is useful.

Normally I would agree with you, except for three points:

- 1) the categorical distinctions are made professionally for publication and (subsequently) awards, even if we readers don't much distinguish beyond the scales of "short story" and "novel" in general;
- 2) granted that the main comparison is to Gene Wolfe's novels, still, I don't believe anyone is complaining about Gene Wolfe's novellas (17,500 - 40,000 words), or novelettes ("Alien Stones," "Forlesen," "The Haunted Boardinghouse," etc.) I think they are limiting themselves to short stories (where the wordcount <= 7,500 words);
- 3) searching for a readily grasped comparison for the scale-differences in novels and short stories, I was trying to think up "world-building" short stories (where world-building seems almost exclusively the province of novels) and was surprised/frustrated in that the couple I could think of were in fact novelettes (which kind of proves my notion, in a way).

One of the neat things about "Semley's Necklace" is that the "off-the-shelf" stuff includes fantasy conventions such as fairies and trolls. It's an old trick to give those science fictional rationales, but Le Guin does so very gracefully, and the story turns on a particular fairy legend, given physical possibility by scientific means, and it does so very nicely.

Precisely: she uses stock sf and fairy tale stuff, and because each item has a bookload of association behind it (from space adventure tales to Brothers Grimm) she is able to tap into "world-building" power without the wordcount. It's all done by association. And yes, she does it so well it is as though she had invented the mode. The later "Winter's King" is smoother, having the developed Le Guin style, and is obviously a treatment of the same story, but lately I'm not sure that it is the better of the two.

Is "Semley's Necklace" based on a specific fairy legend? I did not know that! (I thought Le Guin was using elements, not importing wholesale.) Please name the story for me.

=mantis=

Anthony Ferrara — 27 Jun 2003, 20:08 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

A great master of "world-building" in the short story form, in my opinion, is R.A. Lafferty. In a few pages he can evoke a whole world and even a whole universe for the matter.

Anthony

Michael Andre-Driussi <mantis at siriusfiction.com> wrote:

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Richard Horton — 28 Jun 2003, 04:07 · follows Anthony Ferrara

On Fri, 27 Jun 2003 12:54:14 -0700, you wrote:

Rich Horton wrote:

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Normally I would agree with you, except for three points:

1) the categorical distinctions are made professionally for publication and (subsequently) awards, even if we readers don't much distinguish beyond the scales of "short story" and "novel" in general;

Well, yes (though the "publication" categories are notoriously loose -- I've just been reading a 1961 issue of Galaxy with a 5500 word story proudly labelled "novelette", and I note that in the old pulps you sometimes saw 10,000 word stories bannerred "Complete Novel").

2) granted that the main comparison is to Gene Wolfe's novels, still, I don't believe anyone is complaining about Gene Wolfe's novellas (17,500 - 40,000 words), or novelettes ("Alien Stones," "Forlesen," "The Haunted Boardinghouse," etc.) I think they are limiting themselves to short stories (where the wordcount <= 7,500 words);

I'd argue that there is a useful short story/novella distinction, such that at somewhere between 10,000 and 15,000 words, perhaps, there is a "phase change", if you will, or a qualitative difference in forms. It's a loose distinction -- a 15,000 word story could be in form a "short story" but a 10,000 word story a "novella".

All I really meant was that I didn't think it important that "Semley's Necklace" is 7700 words but another story might be 7400.

3) searching for a readily grasped comparison for the scale-differences in novels and short stories, I was trying to think up "world-building" short stories (where world-building seems almost exclusively the province of novels) and was surprised/frustrated in that the couple I could think of were in fact novelettes (which kind of proves my notion, in a way).

I shall have to try to come up with a world building short -- but I do think your notion is reasonable -- the longer the story, the more building you can do, in general.

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Is "Semley's Necklace" based on a specific fairy legend? I did not know that! (I thought Le Guin was using elements, not importing wholesale.) Please name the story for me.

I think I expressed myself poorly. The overall plot is as far as I know not specifically that of a given fairy tale, but it turns on a common legend about fairies ... I will elaborate after spoiler space

The one where you go "under the hill" for a night and you return years later.

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