



University of HUDDERSFIELD

University of Huddersfield Repository

Stewart, Michael

Rebooting the Lyrical Story: Experimenting with Viewpoint

Original Citation

Stewart, Michael (2016) Rebooting the Lyrical Story: Experimenting with Viewpoint. *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice*, 6 (2). pp. 225-237. ISSN 2043-0701

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/32968/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk.

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

REBOOTING THE LYRICAL STORY: EXPERIMENTING WITH VIEWPOINT

I began my career as a scriptwriter, writing for theatre, radio, TV and film. When I turned to writing short fiction about eight years ago, I realised I had something new to play with: point of view. In my recently published collection of short fiction, *Mr Jolly*, I experiment with viewpoint. In some instances, these were conscious decisions on my part to see what effect, if any, experimenting with viewpoint would have on the structural elements in the stories.

Michael O'Toole discusses point of view and its connection to structure, claiming 'there is still no adequate theory of point of view that can [...] relate it to other dimensions of narrative structure' (p. 37). When I came across O'Toole's proposition, I found it insightful and I set about attempting to discover something about the relationship between viewpoint and structure through a practice-based approach. My stories 'A Flood' and 'This is Where You Get Off' are written in third-person limited omniscience. Esenwein wrote that '[story telling in the third-person] is the commonest, probably the easiest, and surely the safest form of narration. The author keeps entirely in the background' (Esenwein, 1923, p. 111). This was true in 1923 but it can no longer be said that third-person is the default narrative viewpoint. The move towards the lyrical short story structure in the twentieth century has brought about a greater prevalence of the first-person narrative voice, as the structure requires the writer to dramatise the interior life of the character. In fact there has been a gradual development from omniscient perspectives towards the use of free indirect style and then, eventually, to the predominance of first-person narrative modes.¹ Much has been written about the various nuances of first-person and third-person narration. In third-person narrative there has been much discussion about limited omniscience, and omniscient and objective viewpoint. Similarly, the varying degrees of unreliability deployed for dramatic effect through the use of first-person viewpoint have been analysed and debated. Second-person viewpoint is less discussed. It is still a relatively unusual literary device. That is not to say that it has not been used or that the academic world has not responded to its use. Samuel Beckett (1965), Günter

¹ This has not evolved in a straight line. The majority of short fiction before and during the period Poe was writing was third person but Poe utilised first-person extensively. Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) 90.4% in first-person. Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) 27.7% first-person. James Joyce (1882-1941) 15.3% first-person. Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923) 6% first-person. V.S. Pritchett (1900-1997) 28.5% first-person. Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) 0% first-person. Raymond Carver (1938-1988) 61% first-person. Helen Simpson (1959-) 44.4% first-person. Ali Smith (1962-) 75% first-person. David Constantine (1944-) 60% first-person. [My own statistics.]

Grass (1963), Virginia Woolf (1963), James Joyce (1969), Nicholson Baker (1992) and Don DeLillo (1982) are examples of writers who have engaged with this narrative mode. Helmut Bonheim (1983), Monika Fludernik (1996), Mieke Bal (1996) and Roland Barthes (1986) are examples of academics and theorists who have written about second-person narrative epistemology.

Over the past few years I have chosen to explore second-person narrative mode through several works of my own short fiction, and I will discuss three of these. The third story has not been published and is not completed. However, I do refer to it extensively in this exegesis. By writing in second-person viewpoint, my intention has been to further my understanding of its effects on dramatic engagement, primarily how it provokes and involves the reader. Again, we can reflect on how viewpoint refracts structural elements, as O'Toole states. Just as the more commonly used third-person and first-person addresses have many nuances, so does second-person address. My interest here is not in its use as direct address, but in its use as an altogether more ambiguous device:

[The] second-person may turn out to be a specific fictional character, or the reader of the story, or even the narrator himself or herself, or not clearly or consistently the one or the other (Fludernick, 1996, p. 275).

Here Fludernick suggests the potential of this mode. First, I turn to its use in two completed and published short fiction examples of mine. Below are the opening lines of these short stories.

You're going back to the place you played as a child ('You Are Going Back', *Tears in the Fence*, issue 48).

Outside it is snowing. The snow already covers the lawn in the back garden, and the tops of the walls. You go to the doormat, but the post has not yet been ('The Man in The White Coat' *Riptide Journal*, volume 8).

In the first extract, you the reader instantly resist the notion that the 'you' being deployed here is direct address, because, unless the writer is fortuitous, as you read this, you are not doing what it says you are doing: you are not going back to the place you played as a child.

You are, instead, reading. In the second extract, ‘you’ appears later in the text, and by the time the reader encounters it in the third sentence he/she has probably fallen into the default expectation that this is a third-person narrative, so that when the reader encounters ‘you’ he/she needs to re-adjust but after doing so, is quickly brought into the same relation to the pronoun ‘you’ as in the first example. It is clear that ‘you’ are not going to the doormat. The effect of this is that the reader interprets the use of the second-person pronoun to be a literary device, one which, in this case, the narrator is deploying to address a younger self.

It is *not* a case in these texts that the ‘you’ is one of mere replacement for ‘I’. Its function is more complicated. My intention in both of these texts is to utilise second-person, not as a direct address to the reader, or as a mere replacement of the first-person pronoun, but instead for it to function as it does in Bruce Morrissette’s description of it as a *crise de conscience* (1965) and at the same time as Rex Stout uses it in his novel *How Like a God* (1929), which is that of retrospective self-judgement. In both of these narratives an adult narrator/protagonist looks back on a traumatic moment in his childhood. In both cases this trauma is connected with the splitting of the family, the cleaving of the unity of clan which has occurred prior to its normal occurrence – i.e. when the child reaches adulthood. In both cases the child is at the cusp of adolescence – between ten and thirteen years of age – pre-pubescent, old enough to understand what is physically happening in the world of the story, but too young to comprehend the complex emotions leading to such a rift. This is the logical context for the use of ‘you’ instead of ‘I’.

It’s no one’s fault [...] why has your mum said this? Why has she used the word fault?
(‘The Man in the White Coat’)

Just as ‘you’ can be used to replace the more formal ‘one’ when a person wishes to refer to any person of the speaker’s kind (‘one does one’s best’/ ‘you do your best’), so the child here, in the above example, is replacing the less personal ‘one’ with the direct address ‘you’. In other words, it is perhaps a by-product of the development of the English language that this phrase, in the above example, can be interpreted ambiguously. He is twelve years old. He knows that ‘it’ is always someone’s fault. And if it isn’t his mum or his dad’s, then it must be his. The arguments the twelve-year-old boy has heard have always had him as the subject.

In the story 'You Are Going Back' (discussed earlier), the protagonist goes back to an eerie place where he used to play as a child, a place which holds great significance as it is a wood where he rescued his father's Koi carp, which his father had to get rid of when his parents separated. There is a pond in the wood where the boy took the fish. But when he returns, the pond has dried up into a swamp and the fish is deformed. In this act, the 'you' who originally made the journey to the pond in the wood is united with the 'you' who now goes back to find the fish. The fish becomes symbolic of his father – fish have been his father's main hobby – and symbolic of his childhood up to this point as he does not remember a time when the fish were not there. Significantly, the journey back to find the fish is symbolic of a number of other events. The adult protagonist in the story has just split up with his own wife and has been forced to move out, making it difficult to see his own son. Therefore, the voyage to rescue the fish is his way of fixing his own rift with his child. The reunification of the adult protagonist with the fish from his childhood is problematic as the fish's skin has become suppurated from the polluted water, and his eyes and gills swollen from the poison. His failure to look after the fish is symbolic of his own inner turmoil at not being able to care for his son.

In using second-person narrative, my attempt is to allow the protagonist to address an aspect of himself that he finds difficult to confront. The use of 'you' allows him the emotional distance to do this but also creates a sense of the universal 'you' as, presumably all adult readers have had to deal with the separation from familial surroundings that maturation necessitates. In this way I am deploying this technique in the way Uri Margolin writes, in order to 'question, order, assess [and] judge' (Margolin, 1986-87, p. 196). Here the 'you' speaker hopes to 'make explicit those things of which the "you" splinter is unaware, which it has forgotten, suppressed or failed to comprehend.' (Margolin, 1986-87, p. 196).

In the second example, from the story 'The Man in the White Coat', the protagonist is also an autodiegetic narrator – one that is both protagonist and narrator – but one who is more distant. In this instance the protagonist is not making a symbolic journey which connects the 'you' of the child with the self, but is instead in a more complex relationship with the narrator/protagonist referent. It is not clear from what spatio-temporal point of view the narrator is observing the story. It is written in present tense: 'you pour yourself a bowl of Frosties [...] you put the empty bowl in the sink' so that the timeframe is obfuscated. In fact the use of present tense combined with second-person viewpoint does more than merely

obfuscate; the effect of the multi-modality of this real or truncated timeframe is one which both alienates and fractures.

The next paragraph begins, 'You are thirteen years old today', which makes the status of the narrative 'you' ambiguous. This ambiguity is being exploited deliberately for dramatic effect. However, as Brian Richardson argues about the use of this autotelic form of 'you', the reader knows that he or she is extradiegetic, outside the narrative, but the strategy very often is to, 'catch you, the extradiegetic reader, off guard, and make you the subject of the diegesis, thereby spiriting or abducting you into the narrative' (Richardson, 1994, p. 321). How is this functioning here? One technique is the use of generality, as for example, in the sentence, 'Christmas. Just you and your dad.' There is no reference to time or place – where? Which Christmas? Nor is there any particularity which distinguishes 'your dad' from any other dad. This could be anyone and any dad. The reader does not 'see' the narrative father and has only the image of his/her own father to compensate and, in so doing, the reader is brought into the story construct.

The use of second-person in this story is further complicated by the various timeframes the narrative refers to. For example, 'you remember being six, waking up at four o'clock, Christmas morning'. The 'you' now refers retrospectively to a younger self in order to draw dramatic comparisons between this Christmas aged twelve and the Christmases when the family was a single unit. Therefore there are three main timeframes which the narrative plays out: the protagonist's Christmas aged six, the protagonist's Christmas aged twelve and the 'now' timeframe of the story, five weeks later on the day of the protagonist's thirteenth birthday – the day his father has a nervous breakdown. It is entirely possible therefore that Morrissette's *crise de conscience* is that between the thirteen-year-old traumatised self and the narrator/protagonist.

You squeeze his hand hard. You grip on to it with all your might. If you let go he'll drift off, up into the night sky. ('The Man in the White Coat')

The final line of the story underscores this narrative ambiguity because the 'you' who is holding on to his father's hand cannot be the same 'you' as the narrator here; he cannot be holding on to his father's hand at the same time as writing the text. Yet it is written in present tense, forcing the reader to grapple with these actantial tensions – i.e. when the

narrator/protagonist is both subject and object of the narrative. As Mariolina Salvatori has argued, the use of second-person narrative can become a trap, ‘having been made to take an ironic, omniscient stance towards [the protagonist] we might pass judgement on him without realising that we are passing judgement on ourselves’ (Salvatori, 1986, p. 196). We cannot believe the protagonist will drift off, up into the night sky; this is clearly the child’s point of view from a heightened emotional perspective – but then who is the ‘you’ in the story? There is a danger we revert to the default reading of the second person as the reader, as us, and in so doing, the impossibility of flight becomes a possibility, as we see the story world through the child’s point of view.

My final experiment with second-person narrative in short fiction is my attempt to exploit as many of the dramatic ambiguities as this mode permits. Below is the opening of the story:

You are reading this. Part of you wants to stop and do something else, perhaps read something else, or more likely do something entirely different: make a sandwich, phone a friend, look out of the window. But another part of you wants to carry on reading (‘You’ve Got Your Eyes Closed’, unpublished and unfinished).

Here the opening uses a statement which creates the effect of bringing the action of the reader together with the act described and in so doing, creates a simultaneity between reader and text, a point of autodiegesis. It then seeks to dramatise this relationship and perhaps some of the tensions that arise as an effect of this. It continues:

I’ll give you one chance and one chance only to stop reading. Stop now... but you can’t, can you. Well, let’s just say I warned you and let me get to the point of this story: you have killed someone.

My intention here is to jolt the reader from seeing the ‘you’ address not as direct address but as a referent to a fictional character, not just because I like jolting readers but because I want to create a point of dramatic engagement. To shock is one thing, but to shock for effect is another, and although the reader is forced to separate and redefine the ‘you’ pronoun, my intention is, as in the above example, to exploit some of the ambiguity that Salvatori discusses. To clarify, I did not write the story based on Salvatori’s writing, but saw the technique identified by Salvatori in my further reading, and saw that this was the technique I

was utilising. I did, however, seek to experiment with second-person viewpoint, and the fact that the story remains unfinished perhaps attests to the shortcomings of self-conscious experimentation.

I believe that second-person narrative exploits the indeterminacy between the 'you' of the reader, the 'you' of the protagonist/narrator and the 'you' of another character, and in so doing is an under-utilised but apt literary device. Moreover, the use of second-person address can further exploit the way a reader engages with a work of fiction by drawing him or her in to the story world, in a way that the phrase, 'she is reading this' or 'I am reading this' simply cannot do. In both of these examples there is a clear distinction between the protagonist and the reader. Both 'she' and 'I', in this context, disambiguate the narrative and in so doing allow the reader some emotional distance. While the phrase 'She has killed someone' or 'I have killed someone' raises a dramatic question, or in fact a series of dramatic questions – who has she killed? Why? In what way? – it does not unsettle or rattle the reader in the way the phrase 'You have killed someone' does. When we the reader first encounter the phrase, for a split accusatory second a part of us asks, 'Have I?', and it is this radical and striking use of second-person that I find so compelling.

Just as Gerlach posits that the development in story structure (most notably the omission of resolution) is connected with the growth of apostasy in the West (1985, p. 94), so viewpoint can also be understood in its socio-cultural context. It is worth reflecting on how the contingencies of second-person viewpoint reflect on our own unstable, dispersed and divided sense of self. Not only do we ask, albeit momentarily, if we have indeed killed someone, we quickly Rolodex (or 'Google', depending on age and/or preference) through our memories, frantically hoping for a lack of confirmation. We know our memories are not reliable. We know we have hidden certain memories from our conscious selves. We have a horror of what we might find. The 'you' that writes and the 'you' that reads is constantly aware of the 'you' watching over these activities: deliberating, analysing, judging.

What is the relevance of these insights into second person point of view on structure in short fiction? Earlier, I suggested that story structure is a by-product of character motivation. A character is motivated to achieve a goal, but there are obstacles in the way of this character achieving the goal. In addition, there are conditions or 'stakes' if the character does not achieve his/her goal, and these create jeopardy. These three elements – character 'wants',

obstacles, stakes – create the parabola of rising tension as the character progresses through the story world. In an epical story structure, the protagonist is engaged with a physical journey. The goal is an external one: to overcome a monster, to capture the holy grail. The obstacles are also external and the stakes are very often life threatening. In contrast to this, a lyrical story involves a protagonist in an internal journey. The goals are psychological, contained and invisible to the outside world. The obstacles are psychological ones too, constructed from the protagonist's own weaknesses. The stakes are to do with how not attaining the goal will affect the protagonist's psyche, their ego and their sense of self-worth. In 'You Are Going Back', the protagonist is engaged with the physical journey of rescuing the fish, but in reality is motivated more by his need to heal the rift caused by both his own parents' break-up and his current ongoing break-up with his wife and son. The obstacles are actual, in the sense of the fish being infirm and the journey arduous, but the more important obstacles are those to do with his own sense of inadequacy and belief that he cannot change his situation. This sense of inadequacy is directly linked to Morrissette's *crise de conscience*.

I have intimated already that the prevalence of first-person point of view is directly connected to the structural change from the physical journey of the epical story to the psychological journey of the lyrical story. In so doing, I have developed O'Toole's point about the connection between viewpoint and structure. In order to dramatise the protagonist's psychological journey, a first-person narrative mode is often most effective. I like to think that the use of so-called second-person narration is a continuation of this internalised movement. In this regard, second-person narrative is a specialised form of first-person narration; one which seeks to take the intimacy created by first-person narrative mode and make it even more pertinent by exploiting the ambiguity between the protagonist and reader.

This subject of narrative modes is an interesting side issue. We often discuss them as separate and distinct techniques, where in fact they are connected in a much more fluid and proximate relationship. I have tried to show this through my experimentation in the story 'Third Person' (in *The Light That Remains*, 2007). The story is about a female stalker with a crush on a man she works with who is married. At first the story utilises third-person objective narrative mode: 'She sits on the bench and watches the children play [...] he throws a small ball for a medium sized mongrel dog.' (p. 75). What is third-person narrative mode? Who is the person observing her sitting and him throwing? In a conventional third-person story, this question would not interest us. It is the writer, we may conclude, if we give it much thought at all.

Here, I have tried to bring the reader gradually to a point of awareness. Who is the observer of the action in the story? The narrator betrays a bias: ‘he is tall, possibly lanky – but this only adds to his boyish attraction [...] whatever she is thinking will be of no interest. Nothing of interest could come from that dull head.’ (p. 76). But it is not until close to the end of the story that the ‘I’ of the observer appears: ‘I haven’t done anything wrong. All I’ve done is drive. And park. And wait. I wait where he won’t see me’ (p. 77).

This *coup de conte* switches the story from the epic to the lyrical simply by changing the narrative mode. We see that there was always this potential hidden latent within a narrative. For example, we could start out with the following: ‘She walks to work every morning.’ Then continue, ‘I never walk to work, I always drive.’ And then, ‘You sometimes cycle, I’ve seen you a few times now.’ What narrative mode is this? It contains third-, first- and second-person narrative. We see how arbitrary these divisions are. Again, my aim, through this experiment, is not to develop Gerlach’s point about the relationship between viewpoint and structure. That has happened accidentally through the creative process. That’s not to say that viewpoint and structure are in any sort of direct symbiosis, but merely to reflect that there is, to some degree, an interesting correlation that can be exploited for dramatic effect. When ‘Third Person’ was published by Leaf Books, the editor pointed out this combination of internal psychology and more epic mystery structure:

‘Third Person’ by Michael Stewart, the shortest and most economical story in the collection, engages its reader from the off with a pair of astonishingly distinctive voices and a unique style. It’s both a character study and a psychological mystery [...] it’s quite unlike anything else we’ve ever published.

Editor of *The Light That Remains and other stories* (Leaf Books, 2007)

Effacing the author/narrator

Just as I have utilised second-person point of view as a way of distilling the intimacy created by first-person point of view, so later on in my experimentation with narrative modes and story structure, I have tried to efface the author/narrator altogether. Just as third-person point of view can sometimes ask the reader, ‘who is observing/reporting the story?’ so second- and first-person points of view attempt to strip the reader of this awareness altogether. Another

way of taking the writer out of the narrative completely is the dialogue-only story. This is difficult to achieve, particularly with the lyrical story form. Writers have been experimenting with this technique for many years. One thinks of Katherine Mansfield's 'The Black Cap' (1917, ed. 2006). A recent example, within the lyrical story form is Anthony Cropper's 'Love of Fate' (in *Ideas Above Our Station*, 2006). I think, again, my interest in the form derives from my scriptwriting experience where dialogue is so often utilised as the main vehicle of narrative progression. I have developed two narratives which experiment with eliminating viewpoint, through the device of utilising dialogue as the main mode of expression. The first is 'The Phone Call' (in *The Aesthetica Creative Works Annual 2009*). The protagonist makes a phone call to his mother, where it is revealed through sub-text that his life is in crisis. He ends the call and we learn that he is sitting on the edge of a bridge with an expanse of water beneath. The story is left open but it is strongly implied that he is contemplating suicide.

In this story, I have not eradicated narration altogether but have reduced it as much as possible.² 'It was over. He just had to make one last call' (p. 102) is how the story begins. Again, we see a contemporary story which begins at the end, in this case, the penultimate stage in a tragedy narrative. The protagonist attempts to connect with his mother, perhaps even confess his troubles, but is thwarted by her lack of engagement.

Mum...

Yes, love, what is it?

I...

Yes, son, what's on your mind?

I was just going to say...

Go on, what is it?

Happy Mother's Day for tomorrow. (p. 102)

The story ends with the termination of the phone call and the protagonist dropping the phone so that it pirouettes through the air and then disappears into the water, the phone acting as

² My reason for attempting to eradicate narration altogether is to experiment with the relationship between point of view, narrative mode and structure.

precursor symbol of the protagonist's own possible fate. By keeping the narrative to an absolute minimum, I hoped to replicate the intimacy that first and second-person achieve in the lyrical story. The phone call and the subtext are a replacement for the internal thoughts of the character, that would dramatise the various stages in a traditional lyrical story. In this way, my experiment has been to demonstrate other ways the short story can compress and omit structural elements, developing Gerlach's point about implicature when discussing Hemingway's writing. Author effacement, with no internal character thoughts, can be utilised therefore as another technique to achieve Gerlach's 'brevity *with* fullness'.

I wondered, having completed this story, whether I would be able to repeat the technique again, but this time over a longer more sustained narrative, one that involves psychological development for the characters. With this in mind, I wanted to construct a story in mainly dialogue form that was at the upper limits of what we think of as short fiction: 10,000 words. The result, 'The Black Man and The White Man' (to be published in the forthcoming collection), retains Poe's unity of place and time, specifically the spatio-temporal unity he exploits in 'A Tell Tale Heart'. The action takes place in a single bar, over the space of an hour or so. It involves two characters meeting for the first time, their misunderstandings, and their twin realisations. Unlike 'The Phone Call', where there was a clear protagonist, I wanted to leave this ambiguous. Whose story is it? The black man's or the white man's?

By leaving this open, I hoped to write a story that has a twin structure, rather like a double helix pattern, so that for one character, the story was an 'overcoming the monster' narrative, and for the other character, a tragedy; one character going from darkness to lightness, the other the opposite way, from lightness to darkness: hence the ironic title of the story. Interestingly then, it seems that the decision of reducing point of view, through the dominance of dialogue and the reduction and attempted elimination of narrative mode, has created a formal experiment in structure in conjunction with the overt experiment in style. Here then is a performative critique and manifestation of O'Toole's desire to demonstrate the link between point of view and structure. Stripped of viewpoint where possible, we can see clearly the relationship O'Toole discusses.

you are going back

You are going back to the place where you played as a child. It is a wood that was once an old rubbish heap and, as you enter along the path you took twenty years ago, you see the bits of broken glass and rusting cans that always poked out from underneath the roots of the trees. The trees were planted too close together. A botched council job. The trunks of the trees stretch up, gasping for the sun like a fledgling with its mouth gaping for a morsel of food. Each tree has reached as high as it can, so that the trunks are gaunt and pallid and there are no branches until the very top. The whole place seems to totter. No birds come to the wood and nothing grows beneath the trees except damp mud-coloured mushrooms.

As you make your way along the path, you remember bringing a book on trees with you – you must have been eleven. You spent hours comparing leaf patterns and pictures of trees in the book, but the trees in this wood were beyond classification. They were deformed, the leaves drained of colour or too small to fit the illustrations. There is no one else here. Nor is there any evidence of anyone being here. That's what you liked about the place when you were a child. No one ever went there.

As you wend your way through the poles of bark, crushing the slimy fungus under your foot, you remember finding a dead crow hanging by its legs. It was stiff and flies made a gauze of noise around it. It unnerved you, rather like Crusoe spotting the footprints. You

thought you were alone, and you weren't. But there was never any other sign of life and you soon forgot about that dead bird. As you wander, the familiar smell fills your nostrils. It's a stale, fusty stench. Not too unpleasant once you get used to it.

You were twelve the last time you visited this place. That's when your mum left your dad. It was funny, inside you always knew that one day they would part, and yet it came as a shock. You were watching Tom and Jerry and your mum and dad were in the kitchen. You hadn't noticed them talking. But then you noticed the silence.

Philip?

Your mum's voice. Even this is an omen. They call you Phil most times, except when there is something important to say, or when you are in trouble.

Yeah?

They have something they would like to discuss.

You switch off the television, the fizz of black screen in some way significant, and you walk slowly into the kitchen. Your mum looks at your dad, as though to prompt him. He looks back wounded and then turns to you.

What it is, Phil... me and your mum...

He tells you it's not easy. He tells you when you're older you will understand – but he isn't saying anything. His voice peters out. He looks at his wife again and then back at you. He puts his hands to his eyes, as though he's ashamed to look at you. Your mum seems to view the man before her with disgust.

It's your mum who speaks. She tells you they're splitting up. She tells you it's for the best. She tells you your dad is moving out.

You don't know why, but you can't stop it. Hot tears roll down your cheeks. Why are your parents doing this? Your mum is lovely and your dad is a laugh. Of course they argue, but you remember the good times. The holidays, the day trips, snuggling up together on the sofa

on wet Saturday afternoons to watch a *Carry On* film, your mum coming in with a fresh pot of tea and warm buttered toast.

Don't cry, son. It's no one's fault. It's just sometimes grownups can't live together. It doesn't work, even though they want it to work.

Why has your mum said this? Why has she used the word 'fault'? For some reason now, you're thinking it is someone's fault, and you're thinking it's your fault. *You* made them split up. So many times the arguments your parents had were because of you. Because your mum had been too strict and your dad had told her she was crushing you. You'd listened at the door. Or other times your mum had blamed your dad for being too soft on you. For not supporting her. So it was your fault for being bad.

There used to be a pond in the middle of the wood where the trees thinned out. You walk to that clearing. You want to know if it's still there. For some reason you can't put into words, it's important. Will it still be there after all this time? You've heard of a Koi carp that lived for over two hundred years, so maybe it will be. It was the last thing you did before you moved out with your mum. The house was for sale. Your dad's Koi carp collection had to go. Your dad was moving to a flat in town. There was no room for the fish there. There was a man coming to buy the fish off your dad. Twenty fish in all. You don't remember a time before the fish arrived.

You didn't know why you did it, but that night, you crept into the garden with a plastic bag. You took the net by the side of the pool, the pool you helped your dad first dig out, then build, then line, then fill. The old pool had become too small. The fish had grown. You scooped out the smallest fish from the water and put it in the bag with some water from the pool. You called this fish Bruno – you don't remember why. You carried the bag all the way to the wood, to the clearing in the middle, to the pond.

Now you're a man with your own son. Your son is only five years old. How can he understand what you didn't understand at twelve? It was the one thing you promised yourself you would never do. You would stick it out, for the sake of your son. But things have got so bad between you and your wife, that in the end you have to accept that it's better for Josh, your son, if you do split up.

Your wife is right, what sort of house is Josh living in? One of constant arguing or one of ominous silence. You still love your wife, but there are too many differences. The differences that brought you both together. She is outgoing, and you liked that. It made it so much easier at parties. You were no longer the one who stood in the corner looking at the record collection or the one taking books off the shelf, pretending to read them. With your wife nearby you felt more confident. You were able to talk easily with people you'd never met before. But she wanted to go out all the time. She called you boring for wanting to stay in.

Perhaps you are, but your job means long hours and you're too tired in the evening. Besides, it always meant getting a baby sitter, and to you it just didn't seem worth it.

The trees are thinning out, giving the forest floor light enough to grow ferns. The path has run out, and you pick up a branch, to bushwhack your way through. It isn't much further as you remember. You agreed that it's better for Josh if there is one home where he is based. Your new place is a one-bedroom apartment, not really suitable for a five-year-old. You also have to be out first thing, to get to work. You agreed to look after Josh at the weekends. But it doesn't seem fair. You want to spend equal time with your son. Why can't he spend one week at your place and one week at his mum's? Or three and a half days a week with you and three and a half days a week with her? Don't be ridiculous, she said, he won't know whether he's coming or going.

At last you reach the middle of the wood. And there it is, the clearing and the pond. As you walk towards it, you can smell a vile, almost septic stench emanating from the water. As you

come closer you can see a green scum on the surface. There are greasy green leaves. They form a shiny skin. You take the stick you've been using to clear a path and use it to sift the scum. The movement of the dank rotting foliage fills you with disgust.

The water is black and brackish. It looks like stale coffee. The stench is nauseating. You stare into the treacly sump, mesmerised by its stagnant inertia. It's a mirror that reflects only the hollow at the centre of your pupils. It's a mirror that throws up only shadows. You see a glutinous bubble rise to the surface and burst. Is this a sign of life in the murk? Surely nothing could live in this putrefaction.

But there it is, rising to the surface, a thick-skinned fish. Its scales grey and frayed. Its gaping mouth, slimy and emaciated. Its hard, glassy eyes, like a shark's. It stares into you. It has aged and altered, but you recognise it – Bruno. Does it remember you? You feel a shudder travel down your spine. You look at each other. What must it think of this mud that was once a pond?

You stand up and then you're running. Running through the narrow gaps between the trees. Dry dead branches snap under your feet. Mushrooms disintegrate, the flesh rips, the stalks crush.

When you get to your car you're panting. You are wet with sweat. Why did you run away from the fish? What came over you? You will get a bag, like you did twenty years ago. You will get a bag and return, and you will find a home for that fish. That's what you will do.

As you drive back to your apartment, you wonder where you'll put the fish. There's no room. You still have boxes of stuff to unload. There's no way she will take it. Apart from anything else, her new boyfriend would reject the idea on principle. You don't get on with him, for obvious reasons, but you feel that her new boyfriend is deliberately making it hard for you.

Last Saturday you called to pick up Josh. You were taking him for a pizza, and then to the cinema, but her boyfriend had taken him out shopping for some football boots. He never showed any interest in football when he was with you. She said she was sorry, he'd be back soon. But she didn't invite you in. She made you sit in your car for over two hours, until he returned. It turned out Josh had already seen the film. Her new boyfriend had taken him.

Back at your place, you put the kettle on. You're not thirsty but it's a comfort. You sip your tea from the mug she bought you when you first started seeing each other. You sit surrounded by unpacked boxes. The fish seems a long way from where you are now. You hold the mug, remembering the day you took it from its wrapping. You stare at it for a long time. Eventually, you hold the mug to your cheek to feel its warmth. The drawing on the mug made you smile once. It's a picture of a dog on top of its kennel. It reads: all is not lost.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Author's own work

Mr Jolly and other stories, forthcoming publication by Valley Press.

'You Are Going Back', first published in *Tears in the Fence* issue 48, pp. 33-36.

'Third Person', first published in *The Light That Remains and other stories* (Leaf Books), pp. 73-81.

'The Phone Call', first published in *The Aesthetica Creative Works Annual 2009*, pp. 102-103.

'The Man in the White Coat', first published in *Riptide Journal* volume 8, pp. 85-94.

Other references

Bal, M. (1996) 'Second-Person Narrative,' *Paragraph* 19 (3), pp. 179-204.

Baldeswhiler, E. (1969) 'The Lyric Short Story: The Sketch of a History'. In: *Studies in Short Fiction* (1969), quoted in Amigoni, 2000.

Barthes, R. (1986) *The Rustle Of Language*, trans. R. Howard. Oxford: Blackwell.

Beckett, S. (1965) *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. New York: Grove.

Bonheim, H. (1982) *The Narrative Modes: techniques of the short story*. Cambridge: D.S.Brewer, rep.1992.

Bonheim, H. (1983) 'Narration in the Second-Person', *Recherches Anglaises et Americaines*, 16 (1), pp. 69-80.

Cox, A. (2005) *Writing Short Stories*. Abingdon: Routledge.

de Haard, Eric (1990) 'Notes on Second-Person Narration: Tolstoj's First Sevastopol Story' in Eric de Haard, Thomas Langerak and Willem G, Weststeijn (eds.), *Semantic Analysis of Literary Texts. To Honour Jan van der Eng on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, Amsterdam, Elsevier, pp. 257-72.

DeLillo, D. (1982) *The Names*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Ejxenbaum, Boris M (1978) 'O. Henry and the Theory of the Short Story' in Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (eds.) *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, Ann Arbor, Michigan Slavic Press, pp. 227- 70.

Esenwein, J.B. (1923) *Writing the Short Story: A Practical Handbook on the Rise, Structure, Writing and Sale of the Modern Short Story*. London and New York: Andrew Melrose

Ltd.

- Fludernik, Monika (1996) *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*, London: Routledge.
- Gerlach J. (1985) *Towards the End*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.
- Grass, G. (1963) *Cat and Mouse*, trans. Manheim, R. London: Secker and Warburg. Trans. of *Katz und Maus*.
- Joyce, J. (1969) *Ulysses*. London: The Bodley Head.
- Joyce, J. (1977) *Stephen Hero*. (Ed. Theodore Spencer, rev.edn. John J Slocum and Herbert Cahoon.) St Albans: Triad/Panther Books.
- Kermode, F. (1966) *The Sense of an Ending*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lohafer, S. and Clarey, J.E., eds. (1989) *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Margolin, U. (1986-87) 'Dispersing/Voiding the Subject: A Narratological Perspective' *Texte Revue de Critique et de Théorie Littéraire* (Canada) 5/6, pp. 181-210.
- March-Russell, P. (2009) *The Short Story: An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- May, C., ed. (1994) *The New Short Story Theories*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press.
- May, C., ed. (1977) *Short Story Theories*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press.
- Morrisette, B. (1965) 'Narrative "You" in Contemporary Fiction' *Comparative Literature Studies*, 2 (1), pp. 1-24.
- O'Toole, M.(1982) *Structure, Style and Interpretation in the Russian Short Story*. London: Yale University Press.
- Richardson, B. (1994) 'I Etcetera: On the Poetics and Ideology of Multipersoned Narratives' *Style*, 28 (3): 312-28.
- Smith, A. (2008) *The First Person*. London: Penguin books.
- Smith, B.H. (1968) *Poetic Closure*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stern, J. (2000) *Making Shapely Fiction*. New York: Norton.
- Stout, R. (1929) *How Like a God*, New York, Vintage Press.
- Winthers, P. (2001) *The Art of Brevity: Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis*.

University of South Carolina Press.

Woolf, V. (1942) 'Modern Fiction'. In: *The Common Reader*. London: The Hogarth Press, pp. 184-195.

Woolf, V. (1942) 'The Russian Point of View'. In: *The Common Reader*. London: The Hogarth Press, pp. 219-231.

Woolf, V. (1963) *The Waves*. London: Hogarth Press.

Woolf, V. (2006) *Monday and Tuesday*. London: 1st World Library.