

Experiential Rhythm in the Short Story

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Abstract: This paper focuses on rhythm within the short story insofar as it represents a legacy of orality and oral storytelling whose remnants have become embedded within the genre's form over the course of its evolution. More specifically, it looks at particular rhythmic elements which derive from a variable intersection of time, space, and objects-beings combining with the short story's language, imagery, and form to create experiential rhythm: rhythm that surpasses empathy to achieve human experience. It firstly establishes context by exploring rhythm from a philosophical angle as an expression of human experience as articulated by Lefebvre, and then by delving into James Joyce's innovation of the epiphany in the novel as a framework for experiential rhythm in the short story. It suggests that Joyce's technique has become embedded within the genre in a modified form that places experience at the forefront of the short story's form. Secondly, it demonstrates through analyses of three separate story samples under the rubrics of Language, Imagery, and Form, the possibilities for experiential rhythm in the short story: its layers of meaning and function, its diverse applications, and its relevancy in literary studies. By drawing clear parameters around a focused aspect of rhythm in the short story and elucidating the human element within its form, this paper hopes to demonstrate the vitality of rhythmic inquiry as a contribution to the long and arduous discourse surrounding the genre's definition and the development of a short story-based criticism.

Introduction: A Performative Legacy

The messenger of death (the swindler, the able one) removed his silken garments, his ornamental necklaces, earring, and anklets, and disguised himself as a live fish swimming in sweet water.

The messenger of death (the swindler, the able one) removed his silken garments, his necklace and earrings.

The messenger of death and lover of ornament (the swindler, the able one) removed his robes of silk, his necklace, earrings, and anklet and disguised himself as a large live fish swimming in a sweet-water well. "Come," the master of the house called out to him in the language of the fish. The messenger, reaper of souls (the swindler, the able one), removed his robes of silk.

(Abdullah 2008, 117)

Short story writer Yahya Taher Abdullah is known in Arabic literature as "the poet of the short story" for his ability to transcribe the soul of Egyptian oral folktales into original, artful, poetic prose; a "master craftsman of language steeped in a centuries-old oral tradition, a modern-day heir to the itinerant balladeers who performed the ancient epic cycles of North Africa and southern Arabia in Egypt from the fifteenth century onward." (Samah Selim's 'Translator's Afterword' in Abdullah, 2008, 118) He is also

known for having memorized his stories and performed them with gusto to live audiences at Cairo's literary and cultural events. Thus, Abdullah's corpus serves as perhaps one of the most pronounced contemporary examples of the intricate complementary nature of the short story's literary heritage constituted of poetry, anecdote, and oral storytelling.

Abdullah's short story *The Messenger* (above) is exemplary of the genre's legacy: paragraphs like poetic stanzas; an opacity of language revealing intense poetic symbolism; anecdotal brevity and pointedness; a hint of a hidden moral; the repetitive, dancing qualities of oral storytelling; the lyrical qualities of a song. The story marks an intersection of the genre's heritage characterized by rhythm: rhythm of language, of form, and of imagery.

The possibilities for rhythm in the short story are myriad. This paper focuses on rhythm within the genre insofar as it represents a legacy of orality and oral storytelling that has been integral to the short story's evolution in both form and language. More specifically, it will focus on performative aspects of orality as imbued with a sense of action driven through language. This performative language contains within it particular rhythmic elements which derive from a variable intersection of time, space, and objects-beings.

This paper looks at rhythm as an element of the short story's performative, oral legacy. It begins with Henri Lefebvre's philosophical positioning to set a groundwork for the relevance and vitality of rhythm-based inquiry within literature. Examples from James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* will introduce epiphany as a focused application of the genre's rhythmic qualities with emphasis on patterns of language, structure, and imagery. These in turn will carry over into brief analyses of language and form that highlight variable instances of epiphanic or "experiential" rhythm in the short story through innovations of Joyce's technique on the one hand, and manipulations of Lefebvre's time/space/objects-beings triad that constitutes all forms of rhythm. The ultimate aim of this paper is to bring to life the legacy of the short story's oral roots as well as Lefebvre's conceptualization of rhythm as innate to the human experience by emphasizing experiential rhythm as a realization of imagery: imagery created through language and form that surpasses empathy to achieve human experience. It will also argue in favor of the short story's form as a major contributing factor to its brevity, rather than *vice versa*, in the long and arduous journey of discovery and conjecture surrounding the genre's definition.

I: Rhythm, Genre, and Human Experience

“Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm” (Lefebvre 2004, 15). Rhythm, in the most general sense, is a “measured flow” that corresponds to the natural senses – sight, hearing, vision, smell, touch – and derives from influences of time, space, and objects-beings. Lefebvre, in a persuasive attempt to reassert the vitality of rhythm into the philosophical consciousness at an everyday level, contends that rhythm comprises repetition, interferences of linear and cyclical processes, and a natural trajectory of birth, growth, decline and end, and these processes of interaction constitute physical manifestations of the human body’s internal rhythms (which in turn reflect the rhythms of the natural world). Similar to Bakhtin’s speech genres, Lefebvre’s conception of rhythm is situation-based: “Other sectors have their own and specific rhythms: those of the town and the urban, for example, or transport. Or those of culture, which is more or less functionalised and linked to market conditions” (43).

Lefebvre’s philosophy of rhythm awakens the mind to the relevance of rhythm-based inquiry, not least because it marks a break away from the over-simplified conception of rhythm-as-patterns. Rhythm is the outcome of patterns to some degree, but what is more important is what brings about such patterns in the first place: time, space, and objects-beings intersecting and modifying themselves continually.

The interaction of diverse, repetitive and different rhythms animates, as one says, the street and the neighbourhood. The linear, which is to say, in short, succession, consists of journeys to and fro: it combines with the cyclical, the movements of long intervals. The cyclical is social organisation manifesting itself. The linear is the daily grind, the routine, therefore the perpetual, made up of chance and encounters. (31)

There are different rhythms for different neighborhoods, for night and for day, for the rich and the poor, for work and for leisure. The implication is not only that humans are a rhythmic species, but that they are part of a wholly rhythmic world, one in which objects, beings, and circumstances may shift to any degree and rhythm will always exist through the inextricable triad of time/space/objects-beings.

Rhythm in the short story is subject to the same innate constraints, yet it is versatile: just as the rhythms of human feet on asphalt produce sounds within a consistent range, the speed, patterns, appearance, and duration of those rhythms are variable. So it is with the short story. More specifically, a legacy of oral storytelling reveals itself in a textual medium as rhythmic patterns through language, form, and imagery that are deeply connected to human speech. Language changes when modified from

speech to literature because speech is constrained differently than a literary text; in other words, the triad of time/space/object-beings is subject to variable ratios. Performativity implies spoken literature with more (scripted) or less (improvised) influence of a literary text. Therefore, performative aspects of orality show up in the short story as speech *modified* into a textual genre. James Joyce's epiphany technique provides an instance of rhythm in the short story in this regard and provides the foundation for a form of rhythm in the short story referred to hereafter as "experiential rhythm."

II: Epiphany: Rhythm and Experience

Within the parameters of rhythmic inquiry, the topic of epiphany points to vital areas of repetition and vernacular inference carried over from oral storytelling. The intention of this section is to highlight epiphany as a counterpart to rhythm with an eye on performative aspects of orality. James Joyce's novel *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* will introduce key concepts and lay fundamental groundwork in order to transition into the peculiarities of epiphany-as-rhythm within the short story. It is important to keep in mind that, although the actual *moment* of epiphany certainly plays a role within the contemporary, post-Joycean short story, in this particular context the *technique* of epiphany and its subsequent innovations is central. Further, though Joyce was the primary pioneer in advancing the contemporary concept of literary epiphany, this is not to say that the modified instances of his technique are imitations of his work; if anything, it highlights the extent to which the technique has ingratiated itself with the short story more generally and in this case has given way to various forms of innovation, as will be shown in Section III. In many cases it elucidates how human experience can manifest through textual language.

Chapter four of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* closes with the most famous and profound epiphanic episode in the novel when Stephen, on the cusp of manhood, catches sight of a lone girl gazing toward the sea "like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird." A wordless interaction between them instills within Stephen a sense of certainty in a life decision he had longed to make: to go into the world on his own terms and be an artist.

She was alone and still, *gazing* out to sea; and when she felt his presence and the worship of his *eyes* her *eyes* turned to him in *quiet* sufferance of his *gaze*, without shame or wantonness. Long, long she suffered his *gaze* and then *quietly* withdrew her *eyes* from his and bent them towards the stream, *gently stirring the water* with her foot *hither and tither*. The first faint noise of *gently moving water* broke the silence, low and faint and whispering, faint as the bells of sleep; *hither and tither, hither and tither*; and a faint *flame trembled* on her cheek.

- Heavenly God! cried Stephen's soul, in an outburst of profane joy.

He turned away from her suddenly and set off across the strand. His cheeks were *aflake*; his body *aglow*; his limbs were *trembling*. On and on and on and on he strode, far out over the sands, singing wildly to the sea, crying to greet the advent of the life that had cried to him. (1992, 132, Italics added for emphasis)

It is an almost ordinary encounter between Stephen and the girl from afar which appears to him as a profound revelation. Part of what makes the encounter profound is also what saves it from being ordinary: the details of what went before, what was contained within it, and what was revealed as future possibility. The moment echoes language and imagery previously alluded to in Stephen's life and encounters as a young man, word such as the "hither and tither" and religious intonation of words like "shame," "suffer," "flame," "God," "soul," as well as the allusions to the sea itself. These well-known references are manipulated into something new and extraordinary because they are more than purely linguistic in nature. For example, the repetition of evenly spaced female figures within the text may signify Stephen's soul as one of a feminine nature, which culminates in his seaside epiphany opposite the seabird girl, for

the girl becomes an amalgamation of all the images of the female and all of the women who have occupied Stephen's conscious and subconscious thoughts throughout the course of the book. The central images he has evolved for four chapters, the bird image, the virgin image, and the courtly love image, are clothed in now-familiar language. (Bowen 1981-1982, 110)

Joyce's epiphany technique, when applied in a sophisticated fashion as in *Portrait*, adds layers of meaning and complexity and Stephen's seaside epiphany can be viewed as a microcosm of the story's rhythmic imagery.

In his classic study of the short story, Frank O'Connor analyzes several of Ernest Hemingway's stories through the prism of Joyce's stylistic influence. O'Connor points to a particular linguistic technique common to both authors whereby certain words are repeated within a very compact space in order to impart within the reader a psychological impression, though without being obviously redundant. The seaside epiphany excerpt is such an example of this technique (emphasized with my added italics).

The effect is significant, because rather than being merely descriptive, whereby the reader may empathize with Stephen's moment of epiphany, here the reader experiences what Stephen experiences; the experience surpasses empathy. Yet it is done in such a way that the hand of the author is all but invisible, an effect O'Connor likens to that of a magician or a hypnotist (2003, 107). Speaking on Hemingway's employment of Joyce's technique, O'Connor says:

By the repetition of key words and key phrases... it slows down the whole conversational movement of prose, the casual, sinuous, evocative quality that distinguishes it from poetry and is intended to link author and reader in a common perception of the object, and replaces it by a series of verbal rituals which are intended to evoke the object as it may be supposed to be. (107)

In other words, such repetitive acts have the effect of creating for the reader experiential imagery. Such imagery is common to the post-Joyce short story and repetition often plays a vital role, giving way to what Suzanne Ferguson articulated as a philosophical shift on behalf of writers towards “representation of experience” (1994, 220); it is a thread connecting the literary to the world of human experience, made manifest in shared rhythms that echo human speech in their patterns.

III: Experiential Rhythm in the Short Story

Experiential rhythm in the short story is characterized by language, form, and imagery that create a thread of experience between the text and the world of human rhythms and, thus, experience. Following on the heels of Joyce’s epiphany technique, the analyses in this section will provide further analytical examples of experiential rhythm in the short story in order to illustrate the language, imagery, and form-based influences and their contingency upon the triad of time/space/objects-beings as articulated by Lefebvre. All three – language, imagery, form – are equally present and share similar characteristics, but by breaking them apart, I hope to show the variable layers which contribute to what O’Connor referred to as “common perception,” or experience.

A: Language

In terms of style, Yusuf Idris is likely as far from Joyce as one may get, but consider the opening lines from one of his most famous stories, *The House of Flesh*:

The ring is beside the lamp. Silence reigns and ears are blinded. In the silence the finger slides along and slips on the ring.
In silence, too, the lamp is put out.
Darkness is all around.
In the darkness eyes too are blinded. The widow and her three daughters. The house is a room.
The beginning is silence.
(Idris 1978, 1, Italics added for emphasis)

The entire story follows much of this language pattern, cleverly employing key words and phrases intended to create an almost hypnotic link of experiential imagery between the text and reader. Whereas the ring and the lamp are both epiphanic symbols, like the chalice in Joyce’s *The Sisters*, words

like “light”, “silence” and “darkness” are the vocabulary of ambience. Employed together through consistent spacing and shrewd timing, they contribute to the construction of the entire story as an epiphanic episode, akin to *Portrait*’s seabird epiphany but expanded and consolidated through limited, repetitive language.

This repetitive language, consistent spacing, and shrewd timing create a signature rhythm of the story that establishes a momentum of suppression and revelation that pull the reader in and lulls the consciousness into a sort of hypnotic trance. The incomplete quality of the sentences gives them the feeling of stage directions for a play or a film and the language is strikingly similar to those of campfire stories: stories intended to put the audience on guard, to pay close attention.

The first lines of the story introduce the main language and rhythm of the text. The language here does the majority of the work of the story, relying more heavily on language than plot, to the extent that the language and its spacing and timing is *constitutive* of the plot. This is evident at the end of the story when Idris breaks the established rhythmic pattern in the last paragraph in an unusual assertion of authorial intent intended to explain the insinuation of the text. This removal of the mask, so to speak, was unnecessary, for even had the reader not understood the exact meaning of the story, it’s quite likely that the experience of the text would have remained mainly unaltered thanks to the effective ambience of the language patterns.

B: Imagery

Language gives rise to imagery, and intense repetition of key words and phrases creates an unyielding ambience of imagery. This was evident in *House of Flesh*, but it is even more so in Albert Camus’s *The Sea Close By* (1954) in which images of the sea constitute the story itself.

At midnight alone on the shore. One moment more and then I shall set sail. The sky itself has weighed anchor, with all its stars, like those ships which at this very hour gleam throughout the world with all their lights and illuminate dark harbour waters. Space and silence weigh equally upon the heart. (Camus 2013, 10, Italics added for emphasis)

The world is dark, lonely, heavy, but there are moments of brightness that give a reason to hope, and the sea is before you, calling you to other possibilities. This scene is strikingly reminiscent of Stephen’s seaside epiphany in *Portrait*: there is the obvious similarity of the sea that seems to beckon its subjects to their futures, but there are also similarities in key words that evoke light through fire - cheeks aflame in Joyce, stars and lights (burning balls of flame) of illumination in Camus.

The relationship between language and imagery is mediated through humans' inextricable connection with the natural environment in the form of metaphor. Kövecses describes metaphor in broadly metonymic terms with emphasis on the process of linguistic translation via clever usage of image mapping:

If we want to fully understand an abstract concept, we are better off using another concept that is more concrete, physical, or tangible than the abstract target concept for this purpose. Our experiences with the physical world serve as a natural and logical foundation for the comprehension of more abstract domains. (Kövecses 2010, 7)

The use of certain key words – especially those which evoke nature (such as light or water) – give rise to particular imagery and it is this process of mediation that characterizes the fundamental difference between language and imagery where rhythm is concerned; language is a vehicle for imagery, but as previously discussed, it is equally dependent upon the timing and spacing of such images.

C: Form

Form is essentially the product of language and imagery through the parameters of time and space, yet Grace Paley's short story *Wants* (1974) may appear as a departure:

I saw my ex-husband in the street. I was sitting on the steps of the new library.

Hello, my life, I said. We had once been married for twenty-seven years, so I felt justified.

He said, What? What life? No life of mine.

I said, O.K. I don't argue when there's real disagreement. I got up and went to the library to see how much I owed them.

The librarian said \$32 even and you've owed it for eighteen years. I didn't deny anything. Because I don't understand how time passes. I have had those books. I have often thought of them. The library is only two blocks away. (1999, 133)

There are no italics here because the language is suggestive rather than explicit. Yet the story shares striking similarities with the previous examples. The language still manages to evoke powerful imagery: the invocation of time passing and the woman's consistent lack of appreciation for that time having passed, plus an overall sense of denial, of stagnancy. The language does not immediately appear repetitive, yet it still manages a rhythm based on repetitive imagery. Paley does not repeat key words and phrases *verbatim*, but manages to create an insistent sense of ambience based on repetitive imagery, using different words to convey similar meaning repetitively - first through a broken relationship with her ex-husband who has moved forward without her realizing that time has passed,

and then through a relationship of denial with her local library which has continued to add charges to her account while she considers her checked-out books for eighteen years without returning them.

Unlike the previous examples, it's necessary to read on to see how experiential imagery manifests in this story:

I'd checked out the two Edith Wharton books I had just returned because I'd read them so long ago and they are more apropos now than ever. They were *The House of Mirth* and *The Children*, which is about how life in the United States in New York changed in twenty-seven years fifty years ago. (134)

Whereas the examples of Idris and Camus demonstrated instances of unrelenting repetition, *Wants* demonstrates the extent to which rhythm manifests through form rather than strict, visible patterns: variable employment of time and space. This practice is more akin to Joyce's technique in *Portrait*, which as a novel naturally evokes experiential rhythms in fits and starts rather than sustaining them throughout the book. *Wants* is less than three pages long, yet it calls on a similar method, continuing an overall theme of denial at time passing while alternating between surface themes set up like stanzas – relationships, books, food, money – to convey similar meaning. Here, overall form overwhelms isolated instances of language and imagery.

Conclusion: Rhythmic Voids

The performative, oral legacy of the short story's heritage manifests in aspects of the genre's variable rhythms. As an intrinsic aspect of the human experience, rhythm shows up in the short story through manipulations of time and space, along with objects-beings constituted in this case by language, imagery, and form. One result of such manipulations has been referred to here as experiential rhythm, which results from consistent, repetitive employment of key words, phrases, or imagery pioneered by Joyce's epiphanies to produce an experience of the genre's form that surpasses empathy.

This paper commenced with perhaps the most intensive employment of this technique with Abdullah's *The Messenger*, in which consistent repetition of key words is constitutive of imagery and plot to create an experience of language akin to poetry: written literature's most obviously oral and performative manifestation. It ends with Grace Paley's *Wants*, a less obvious manifestation of similar techniques that takes its cues from the more lengthy prose form of the novel, considerably more similar to Joyce's techniques than Abdullah's and yet markedly distinct. *Wants* is a bridge between experiential rhythm and other manifestations of rhythm in the short story, particularly those resulting from voids,

insinuations, and metaphor rather than explicit language. Voids are vital to the short story's form, yet they nonetheless exist only through manipulations of language, imagery, and form, and through time and space; in other words, through rhythm.

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