

REVIEW

Review of Allan H. Pasco's *The Nineteenth-Century French Short Story: Masterpieces in Miniature*

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Building on his *Inner Workings of the Novel: Studying a Genre* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), Allan Pasco turns his attention to the genre of the short story in his most recent book, *The Nineteenth-Century French Short Story: Masterpieces in Miniature* (Routledge, 2020). Having previously published numerous articles on the short story and multiple editions of a French short story anthology, I can think of no one more suited for such a study.

Aware that literary criticism has largely moved away from structuralist analyses, Pasco sets out to argue for the importance of considering the short story as a unique genre while updating the definition in a way that resonates in our current critical moment. He argues from the opening pages that more than any other genre, the short story, when expertly crafted, invites the reader “into the creative process” (ix), adding that “when readers are reading, they quite properly act as though conventions [...] do exist” (2). In other words, however we might approach short stories as critics, all readers remain aware of generic conventions and approach short stories accordingly. Pasco reiterates his argument in these terms: “However impressed one might be by those who would avoid the problem of literary genres by denying them, it is indisputable that most readers are firmly conscious of genre and use their preconceptions to guide their reading” (14). Since these generic conventions shape readers’ expectation, and since the short story persists as a distinct genre, he maintains that “definitions must shift, change, and adjust to reflect the reality circumscribed [...]. They reflect shifting, communal agreement.” So, while he does offer his own definition of the short story, he acknowledges that it is always a definition in flux, one that will never be fully formed, but one that should always take the reader’s real experience into account.

With this background, Pasco advances his definition: “A short story is an *artistically designed, short, prose fiction*” (5). Dick and Jane stories, designed to help children learn to read, are not artistically designed, for example, neither are the many stories that populate commercial magazines—they are written for distinctly utilitarian ends. Short stories are fictional, meaning they “include factual history only incidentally,” and artistically raise this factual history to a “new reality” (6). “Short,” is likely the most problematic of the elements in Pasco’s definition. He largely follows Poe’s claim that “one should be able to read a short story at one sitting,” adding, “Bookmarks may be for quitters, but they are not for short stories” (11). Pasco wisely adds several caveats, noting, for example, that “definitions in aesthetic matters are never definitive; they are guidelines *or* baffles that may at any point be abandoned by either readers or writers” (10). However, a generally accepted definition is required for an author (or a reader) to work with or against it, to exploit or to transgress it.

Pasco concludes the book's introduction by remarking: "I have been only secondarily interested in providing a definition, and certainly not a formula. It is rather the defense of such a definition which might be most helpful" (13). From there, he proposes analyzing a number of significant nineteenth-century short stories, noting that "the more adequate the preconception, the more chance there is of a satisfactory reading [...] whether it be in line with or in revolt against that particular cluster of traits that I have treated here and that most of us recognize as a short story" (14).

Pasco then walks the reader through examples of the best short stories from Denon's "Point de lendemain," through Mérimée's "Carmen," Hugo's "Claude Gueux," and Flaubert's *Trois Contes*, while also visiting Huysmans, Barbey d'Aurevilly, Balzac, and Maupassant. The analyses of these short stories prove the high point of the book and they allow Pasco to examine the *pointe*, plot and narration, different approaches to denouement, and various uses of frames and sequence in multiple short stories. In each of his dives into the different authors' works, Pasco emphasizes the role of the reader and the importance of the condensed narrative to focus the reader's attention ("brevity [...] used for aesthetic purposes" [86]). In his conclusion he writes, "Reading great stories is more than a spectator sport. They demand that the reader wrestle with the implied concepts and implications to gain the prize" (164).

The book can be read as a whole, each chapter contributing to elucidate the nature of the short story; or chapters can be read on their own, as pleasant, astute analyses of a particular author or work, with no need for bookmarks. Each chapter effectively incorporates existing scholarship about the works in question and provides an original reading of that chapter's story or stories. Indeed, anyone teaching a course on the French short story should consider this work as an important and useful reference; Pasco's insightful readings would make for compelling discussion questions and would help students get to the heart of the narratives.

Though there are no stories by women or by French speaking writers from outside the Hexagon, Pasco explains that he selected the works in this volume because they are "outstanding examples of short-story masterpieces of nineteenth-century France, the period when short stories bloomed in full maturity" (165). Pasco succeeds in reinvigorating the notion of genre and of the short story through his definition and analysis of the different components of the short story, and primarily through his compelling, innovative readings of the stories themselves.