



TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

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Strange associates: Weird affect, weird fiction and the weird short story

Abstract:

Despite its commercial popularity, weird fiction remains largely overlooked by genre and literary scholars. To date, weird studies have primarily focussed on either defining the genre and its tropes, or mapping the preoccupations of weird writers. Consequently, weird scholarship has not yet explored how the weird both preserves and transforms itself in an ever-evolving publishing landscape. One particularly understudied phenomenon is the genre's near-symbiotic relationship with the short story, even as the longer form appears to offer greater space for the weird to flourish. Thus, the question arises as to why the short-form weird persists, despite recent attempts to adapt the weird to longer forms such as the novel and the film. Accordingly, this paper investigates weird fiction's relationship with the short story, and argues that the short story is perhaps the most 'natural' form for the weird. The article spotlights some of the critical gaps that exist in weird scholarship, while at the same time offering insight into why weird short fiction remains popular with authors, even as the genre gravitates toward longer forms.

Biographical note:

Emily Morrison is a writer, editor, and PhD candidate at the University of Southern Queensland. Her research investigates weird fiction and its many adaptations, including the resistance of weird fiction monsters to pop culture pacification. In 2023, Morrison won the Aurealis Award for Best Science Fiction Short Story for 'Customer Service', a weird story about an automotive doll that is made to be the perfect woman but who is always returned by her buyers. Morrison's speculative short story anthology *Mother's Milk* was published in 2023 under the pseudonym Emily Wyeth.

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Keywords:

New weird, short fiction, short stories, weird affect, weird fiction

Introduction

Recent shifts in the publishing industry – such as the publication of the British Library’s *Tales of the Weird* series (2018–) and the relaunch of the short story magazine *Weird Tales* (2019), as well as the emergence of an independent London-based press that exclusively publishes short stories, Scratch Books – suggest that there is an increased demand for short-form weird fiction. This demand is reflected in the popularity of weird media, including the award-winning series *Black Mirror* (2011–), the science fiction anthology *Electric Dreams* (2017–2018), and Netflix’s animated collection of weird tales *Love, Death & Robots* (2019–). Indeed, several episodes of the latter are based on the works of well-known weird authors such as Alan Baxter, Harlan Ellison and Joe R. Lansdale, while *Electric Dreams* is based on various short stories by the prolific weird science fiction writer Philip K. Dick. In the past decade, a number of ‘classic’ speculative fictions have also been adapted to the big screen with relative success, including Jeff VanderMeer’s novel *Annihilation* (2014; 2018), Matt Ruff’s *Lovecraft Country* (2016; 2020) and H. P. Lovecraft’s famous short story ‘The Colour Out of Space’ (1927; 2019). The adaptation of weird short stories for both the small and big screen, and the infiltration of the weird into mainstream television and film, confirms a growing interest in the genre. As Dodd and Germaine Buckley (2021) observe, “We live in weird times ... The weird emerges at the fringes but also in the mainstream; it is mobilised by top-down media power for profit as well as grassroots, indie productions” (p. 5).

Despite the commercial success of weird fiction, the genre remains largely neglected by genre and literary scholars. To date, weird studies have primarily focussed on either defining the genre and its tropes (Luckhurst, 2017; Miéville, 2009; Ulstein, 2019; VanderMeer & VanderMeer, 2010) or mapping the preoccupations of weird writers (Noys & Murphy, 2016; Joshi, 2017; Ulstein, 2019). Consequently, weird scholarship is yet to explore how the genre both preserves and transforms itself in a dynamic and constantly evolving publishing landscape. One particularly understudied phenomenon is the genre’s near-symbiotic relationship with the short story, even as the longer form appears to offer greater space for the weird to flourish. Thus, the question arises as to why the short-form weird persists, despite recent attempts to adapt the weird to longer forms such as the novel and the film. Certainly, the long-form weird is typically engaged by new weird writers after they have authored weird short stories, with many weird authors continuing to publish in the short form after they have published one or more novels. Contemporary weird authors Mariana Enríquez and John Langan, for example, are writers whose respective novels – *Our Share of Night* (Enríquez, 2022) and *The Fisherman* (Langan, 2017) – followed the publication of several award-winning short story collections, including the shortlisting of Enríquez’s *The Dangers of Smoking in Bed* (2021) for the 2021 International Booker Prize and Langan’s receipt of both Bram Stoker and Locus Award nominations for *Mr. Gaunt and Other Uneasy Encounters* (2000).

This paper contributes to a long-overdue conversation about weird fiction’s longevity and the enduring appeal of the weird short story. Specifically, we argue that weird fiction remains intertwined with the short story form due to the heightened impact that brevity affords – an affordance that intensifies what China Miéville (2012b) terms the genre’s “weird affect”. For

Miéville, the weird's affective potential is connected to the genre's "radical otherness", which works through a "counterposing alterity" that is both unknowable and unrepresentable (p. 380). For Ann and Jeff VanderMeer (2010), too, the weird is "as much a *sensation* as a mode of writing" (p. xiv). To understand, then, how weird affect works and how the weird short story maintains its destabilising or disruptive power requires an appreciation, first, of the reciprocity between content and form. Thus, the following sections offer a brief history of both the weird genre and the short story itself.

The who, what, when and why of weird: Defining the undefinable

The weird fiction genre and the short story form have been a consistent pairing since the early 20th century due to the weird's inception being closely linked to the publication of the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* (Miéville, 2009). In fact, the relationship between genre and form predates the magazine's conception, with Lovecraft crediting Poe as "directly affecting not only the history of the weird tale, but that of short fiction as a whole" (1927/1945, p. 52). Yet, attempts to explain this coupling consistently fall short, with the definition of the genre itself a point of contention among contemporary weird writers and scholars. Roger Luckhurst (2017) argues that the weird evades easy categorisation because it "seeks crabbed or difficult prose, transgressive or evasive content, genre slippage, and elusive authors as emblems of aesthetic resistance to the market" (p. 1046). Gry Ulstein (2019) agrees with Luckhurst that "the weird is often categorised by its refusal to fit neatly into categories" (p. 53). As such, it is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a definitive characterisation of weird fiction. However, various attempts at definition are considered below in order to emphasise the genre's amorphous nature. Certainly, what is considered 'weird' for one reader may be entirely 'normal' to another, which may in part explain why there is no consensus around what does (and does not) constitute weird fiction. As Morticia Addams famously declares in *The Addams Family Musical*, "Normal is an illusion. ... What is normal for the spider is calamity for the fly" (Brickman, Elice & Lippha, 2010, p. 24).

In critical scholarship, weird fiction is often divided into a two-stage periodisation: the old weird (1880–1940) and the new weird (1980–2000) [1]. Old weird, which is defined by the works of early weird authors such as H. P. Lovecraft and Algernon Blackwood, contains the first examples of genre blending to create new and experimental stories that emphasise atmosphere over plot (Ulstein, 2019; Noys & Murphy, 2016). New weird, which is often associated with the works of contemporary weird writers such as China Miéville, Jeff VanderMeer and Angela Carter, maintains the unsettling atmosphere of the traditional weird and the old weird's tendency to undermine human subjectivity through encounters with the alien or the monstrous, but repositions the Other as "a site of affirmation and becoming" rather than a mere conduit of anxiety and dread (Noys & Murphy, 2016, p. 125). As Ulstein (2019) explains, the new weird "implies a responsibility to engage with the monstrous rather than become passively consumed with dread, as the old weird often entails" (p. 54). The general consensus that weird fiction originated in the 19th century with the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe is widely accepted by weird scholars (Patea, 2012; Joshi, 2017; Ulstein, 2019). S. T. Joshi (2017), for example, traces the origins of weird fiction to Poe's refashioning of "the

cumbersome ‘dramatic paraphernalia’ (as Lovecraft called it) of the gothic novel” into the early foundations of cosmic horror (p. ix). Ulstein (2019) likewise claims that the genesis of weird fiction can be traced to Poe, while Jorge Luis Borges (1975/2001) even ventures so far as to suggest that Lovecraft was “an unwitting parodist” of the American writer (p. 40) [2].

Indeed, some of the aesthetic features of the gothic, which Smith (2013) identifies as “representations of ruins, castles, monasteries, and forms of monstrosity, and images of insanity, transgression, the supernatural, and excess” (p. 4), are equally constitutive of weird fiction. As a transmutable genre with metamorphic resilience, the gothic “mutates across historical, national, and generic boundaries as it reworks images drawn from different ages and places” (p. 4). Yet, in spite of the genre’s elasticity and remarkable capacity for adaptation, Punter (2012) and Bruhm (2002), among others, argue that the gothic remains fixated on psychoanalytic notions of the suppression and invocation of trauma, or “the pain of the wound” (Punter, 2012, p. 8). In the Australian Gothic, for example, Gildersleeve and Cantrell (2022) observe that the gothic’s forensic compulsion seeks to “exhume or exorcise different national traumas”, with the recurring preoccupations of “moral ambiguity, cultural neurosis, and ecological devastation, inextricable ... from the illegal occupation of the land” (p. 10). While contemporary weird fiction often incorporates – or inflicts – an experience of trauma, it is ultimately both the weird’s inherent alterity and its embodiment in objects and phenomena that defy categorisation which distinguishes weird fiction from gothic horror. Newell (2017) for example, imagines the weird as “a kind of tumour growing out of the gothic – an outgrowth, composed of the same tissues but unfamiliar, defiant of category, alien and yet not-entirely-so, at once a part of its progenitor and curiously foreign to it” (p. 6). Similarly, Cisco (2021) describes the weird as having “a tendency to make genre itself behave bizarrely. ... A weird tale is not weird because it describes events that may or may not fit into some category of the supernatural; they are events that weirdly fail to belong to any category” (pp. 7–8). For this reason, some theorists propose that the weird is, in fact, not a genre at all, but rather a literary mode (Fabrizi, 2023; VanderMeer & VanderMeer, 2010; Joshi, 1990).

More recently, John Locke (2018) has argued that both the naming of weird fiction as a genre and the first publication of the weird short story can be traced to 1923, with the launch of the *Weird Tales* pulp magazine in Chicago. From its inception, *Weird Tales* marketed itself as “a magazine of the bizarre and unusual”, and featured now well-known weird authors, including Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard and Clark Ashton Smith. According to Everett and Shanks (2015), when *Weird Tales* first appeared on newsstands, “there was nothing else like it” (p. ix). Indeed, part of the magazine’s appeal was the way that it gathered “orphan stories” from genres as diverse as horror, science fiction and fantasy, and published this confluence of unusual and unconventional tales as “weird fiction” (p. ix). The term ‘weird fiction’, however, was actually coined by Lovecraft, who popularised the term through a series of essays, published between 1920 and 1937, in which he detailed how the weird had developed out of, and was distinct from, gothic horror (1927/1945). Everett and Shanks (2015) reiterate that “the weird tale itself did not originate with the magazine [since the weird] had its roots in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Mary Shelley, [and] Washington Irving [etc.]” (p. ix). Joshi (2015) adds that before *Weird Tales* was established, weird fiction was not mass-produced, and no other magazine or journal

was devoted exclusively to the weird. For Joshi, as for Everett and Shanks, the legitimization of the weird can be largely attributed to both the magazine's unique publishing mandate and the fact that its most influential contributors – Lovecraft and Howard – exerted great influence on the burgeoning genres of modern horror and fantasy. Certainly, it was during the 1920s and 1930s, the so-called 'golden age' of *Weird Tales*, that "the gestation and crystallisation of modern American horror and fantasy took place" (Everett & Shanks, 2015, p. xiv).

It was also during this time that those writers most connected to the weird gained recognition for their work. Lovecraft is undeniably the first author to be associated with both weird fiction and cosmic horror; his cast of ineffable monsters, such as his hooved and tentacled deities, are what most readers picture when they think of the 'weird'. In this respect, Lovecraft transformed Poe's spectral and uncanny figures into extraterrestrials, like the 'Great Old Ones' and divine emanations, which Lovecraft reconfigured into eldritch beings he called 'Elder Gods' and 'Outer Gods'. Indeed, Lovecraft's vision of the weird, as evinced in *Weird Tales*, resulted in the formation of a community of writers who consciously invented a new mode of horror fiction, which is today known as Lovecraftian (Everett & Shanks, 2015). In 1927, Lovecraft provided his own definition of the weird. For Lovecraft,

the true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain – a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space. (1927/1945, p. 15)

While Lovecraft's friend and peer Robert E. Howard also dabbled in horror, Howard is best known for his contributions to speculative fiction. His stories of Conan the Cimmerian blended historical adventure fiction with Lovecraftian horror, and thus originated the sword-and-sorcery subgenre (Joshi, 2007; Everett & Shanks, 2015). Howard's stories found a readership in *Weird Tales* and not only shaped the magazine's voice and tone, but also immediately impacted the work of Howard's contemporaries, most notably Clark Ashton Smith and C. L. Moore. As Everett and Shanks (2015) note, "*Weird Tales* served as a crucible for genre exploration, creation, and hybridisation" (p. xvi), without which modern weird fiction may never have been born.

Making sense of the weird: New understandings

Contemporary weird author China Miéville (2012b) describes weird fiction as an expression of ecstasy and awe, "a beauty that is terrible and beyond-kenn-or-kennableness" (p. 380). For Miéville (2009), "this obsession with numinosity under the everyday is at the heart of weird fiction" (p. 510). Arguably, in an age when the answers to most questions are readily available, the mysteries of the world are few. Weird fiction serves to reinstate a sense of strangeness in the everyday physical world by evoking in the reader a simultaneous sense of delight and dread (Mayer, 2018; Ulstein, 2019). Thus, Miéville's definition of the weird deftly captures what old

weird and new weird have in common: both “express upheaval and crisis by destabilising the category of the human in relation to the monstrous and the supernatural” (Ulstein, 2019, p. 52).

Certainly, for Miéville, as for Lovecraft, gothic monsters such as Coppola’s *Dracula* are ill-equipped to both fascinate and frighten because their oversaturation in popular culture has blunted their affective power. Simply put, “[their] excessive familiarity deguts them, defangs them” (2012a). Weird monsters, on the other hand, evade symbolic decoding by evading meaning – by being “all shapes and no shapes” at once (Miéville, 2012b, p. 381). In other words, weird monsters are “teratological expressions of the unrepresentable and unknowable” (p. 381). From Lovecraft’s Cthulhu in ‘The Call of Cthulhu’ (1928) to Miéville’s oil rigs in ‘Covehithe’ (2016), to the sinister and unnaturally fast-growing chick in Nalo Hopkinson’s ‘Slow Cold Chick’ (2018), the weird monster resists easy interpretation. In each of these stories, a seemingly ordinary thing, such as an octopus tentacle or a fertilised egg, is twisted into something inexplicable. This, in turn, creates an unsettling experience or sensation – what Miéville (2009) describes as “the burgeoning sense that there is no stable status quo but a horror underlying the everyday” (p. 513). However, as VanderMeer and VanderMeer (2010) observe, “with this unease and the temporary abolition of the rational, can also come the strangely beautiful, intertwined with terror” (p. iii). Notably, both old and new definitions of the weird tend to be based on the presence of a weird or destabilising atmosphere or force, more than any combination of formal structures or tropes. Miéville’s conception of the weird, however, is not universally accepted and has been both challenged and extended by other weird writers and scholars, such as Emily Alder and Henry Bartholomew.

Alder’s contribution to the critical exploration of the development of weird fiction is evident in her application of a weird lens to well-known works of gothic, fantasy and science fiction. In her monograph *Weird Fiction and Science at the Fin de Siècle* (2020) Alder repositions the work of H. G. Wells, Arthur Machen, Michael Moorcock and Robert Louis Stevenson as weird fictions that have “either been identified as weird but granted little sustained critical attention, or have attracted considerable critical attention but rarely in the context of the weird” (p. 3). Alder argues that “weirdness is only really visible in hindsight” (p. 237) – a claim that reinforces Joshi’s (1990) argument that weird fiction is less a genre and more a consequence of the world, because of its reactionary nature. In this respect, Alder attempts to provide a clearer definitional framework for understanding the weird. In examining the aforementioned works, she observes that they are separate from, but at the same time incorporate aspects of, the related genres of fantasy, gothic, horror and science fiction – a ‘blending’ phenomenon that is central to the weird. While obvious weird themes, such as cosmic horror, are not present in these works, Alder (2020) notes that “the early roots of the weird tale are entangled with those of gothic and science fiction” (p. 2). Alder suggests, for instance, that weird fiction incorporates works of scientific philosophy that explore the science of the day rather than the supernatural. In this way, the weird is capable of achieving more with scientific culture than science fiction because the weird is both a consequence of, and a direct driving force for, scientific change.

Bartholomew (2021) agrees with Alder’s theory, observing that while gothic fiction “tends to fixate on the past, the haunted, and the ghostly, early weird fiction probes the very boundaries

of reality – the laws and limits of time, space, and matter” (p. 9). Building on Alder, Bartholomew argues that reality may be stranger than fiction by paraphrasing Mark Fisher’s (2016) well-known assertion that black holes are weirder than vampires. As a black hole is both beyond human experience and a part of the cosmos, it cannot be communicated with, or sympathised with, in the way that a vampire might be made ‘relatable’ [3]. Yet, a black hole still arouses fear and awe. Bartholomew’s (2020) connection of weird realism to object-oriented ontology offers a convincing exploration of how philosophical questions can be more effectively explored through speculative texts, since object-oriented ontology and the weird make for “interesting bedfellows” (p. 30). Again, Miéville’s sentient oil rigs, which scuttle up to the beaches to lay their babies, are a good example of the relationship between the weird fiction genre and the philosophical questions posed by the Anthropocene, including what distinguishes the human from the non-human, and whose reality is superior. Like black holes, Miéville’s man-made structures cannot be fully grasped or understood; however, their presence causes a discomfort that is very different to the fear and apprehension registered by the gothic. As Ulstein (2019) observes, “[Miéville’s] story reads more like an invitation to think differently, weirdly, about Anthropocene problems such as the fossil fuel industry. And certainly, the very idea of little oil rig babies hatching is mesmerisingly bizarre” (p. 54).

For Alder and Bartholomew, weird fiction is more capable of instigating and exploring commentary on scientific culture and philosophical theory than traditional fiction genres because “the weird is something which both is and isn’t really there” (Alder, 2020, p. 8). In this sense, the amorphous genre does well in emulating both the ‘normal’ and the ‘real’ in unsettling and unconventional ways that force readers to deeply consider diverse and complex themes. In *The Law of Genre* (1980), Derrida and Ronell observe that genre itself is a limited construct because “as soon as the word ‘genre’ is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind” (p. 56). The weird, however, subverts its tropes and traditions in order to exist as something ‘other than’ previous iterations of the mode. As such, weird fiction, like the short story itself, continues to evolve and adapt, preserving its ambiguous relationship with genre and avoiding the constraints of any definitional attempt. To be sure, different social, cultural and political contexts exert their own influence on the weird, which at present raises the question of why “weird is in” (Culley, 2023).

History of the short story (in short)

By now, the unique history and influences of weird fiction have been established, yet a brief examination of the short form is required to fully appreciate the myriad connections between the two. The 19th century was a crucial period for the development of the contemporary short story, just as it was a critical time for the formation of the weird (Zähringer, 2021). However, due to the various historical changes that have revolutionised the short form, it is difficult to produce a theoretical definition of the short story that corresponds to the practical form (Agrell, 2004; Ferguson, 1994) [4]. This inability to pin down a definition of the short story, as Agrell argues, may be one of the reasons why weird fiction was able to emerge from obscurity. Indeed, Noys and Murphy (2016) suggest that weird fiction, like the short story itself, is a profoundly

hybrid form that often subverts traditional narrative conventions, such as the expectation of a linear structure, a defined setting and a clear point of view. Through its predilection for hybridisation, weird fiction produces “its own distinctive conventions” and “its own generic form” while simultaneously remaining “an unstable construction” (p. 117). The short story, too, is a highly unstable form in which any attempt at a fixed or consensual definition is undermined by the transience of the form.

In her collection of essays on 21st century approaches to the short story, Patea (2012) traces the form’s lineage to “myth and biblical verse narratives, medieval sermons and romance, fables, folktales, ballads, and the rise of German Gothic in the eighteenth century” (p. 2). Yet, as Rohrberger (1966) argues, the short story, as it is understood today, is one of “the newest of literary genres” (p. 140). Patea agrees, observing that the contemporary short story no longer reverts to clichéd tales of the wicked witch who lurks in the forest or the five-headed hydra the hero must slay. Instead, the short story has evolved into a form that is distinct from its predecessors through its concision and its use of narrative conventions that align with contemporary expectations of fiction. Marler (1974) supports this distinction, differentiating between the short tale and the short story proper: while the former tends toward archetypal figures and allegorical settings, the latter privileges narrative complexity and character depth. In contemporary short stories, characters are not symbolic stand-ins for moral lessons but fully realised individuals with complex flaws, desires and an inner consciousness. As Marler explains, in his reading of Frye, “In the tale, there are no ‘real people’; characters [are] ‘stylised figures which expand into psychological archetypes’ ... The short story, by contrast, deals with characters who have ‘personality’ and [who] wear ‘their *personae* or social masks’” (p. 154).

An interesting example of a contemporary short story that has evolved from a traditional fable is Angela Carter’s ‘The Tiger’s Bride’ (1979), a short fiction in which Carter reimagines Leprince de Beaumont’s ‘Beauty and the Beast’ (1756). Most readers will be familiar with at least one iteration of the ‘Beauty and the Beast’ tale in which a female protagonist breaks the spell that has turned her companion into a gruff and brooding creature. Leprince de Beaumont’s tale, which is narrated in the third person, can be read, on one level, as the story of Beauty’s struggle to reconcile her love for her husband with the affection of her father (Joosen, 2011). In Carter’s (1979/2006) retelling, however, the author affords the female protagonist greater autonomy and agency, and subsequently reconfigures the story in the first-person point of view: “I therefore, shivering, now unfastened my jacket, to show him I would do him no harm. Yet I was clumsy and blushed a little, for no man had seen me naked and I was a proud girl. Pride it was, not shame, that thwarted my fingers so” (p. 103). Here, Carter imbues her protagonist with a psychological depth that is absent in Leprince de Beaumont’s tale; the first-person narration, coupled with the character’s self-disclosure, ensures the reader does not mistake the protagonist’s trepidation for anything other than what it is. In contrast, Leprince de Beaumont’s (1756) description of Beauty is considerably flat: “Beauty blushed ... she had seen in her glass, that her father had pined himself sick for the loss of her, and she longed to see him again”. Where Leprince de Beaumont’s narrator relays to readers what they ought to know about Beauty, Carter allows her unnamed protagonist to tell readers what she wants them to know – about how she feels and the circumstances in which she finds herself. In this way, Carter injects

her character with a depth and dimension that leaves a lasting impression, despite the story's brevity. Indeed, Charles E. May (1994) posits that both the aesthetic and moral truth of a short story do not come from its imitation of reality, but rather from the author's skilled use of "compression, pattern, and intensity" (p. xxv). May, therefore, credits the compact nature of the story as the innovation that generates the most impact – what V. S. Pritchett calls "the electric shock" (as cited in May, 1994, p. xxvi).

Nevertheless, short stories, due to their mythic origins, have not always been readily accepted as a literary form that deserves critical attention. In fact, to be taken seriously, the short form was forced to adapt to the conventions of mimesis that emerged during the rise of early 19th century realism (Patea, 2012). During this time, fantastical and mythical accounts of heroes morphed into fable-like tales, before these fables transformed again into the recognisable ghost stories of the gothic genre. An illuminating example of this shift is offered by Kröger and Anderson (2019), who explain that during the latter half of the 19th century, as scientists and seekers of the spiritual realm began to explore what happens after death, "shadowy fact and spooky fiction fed into each other" (p. 50). At this time, modern inventions such as photography occasionally manifested strange faces and mysterious orbs alongside the photographer's subject. Bloom (2010) observes, for example, that spirit photography became especially popular in America during the 1860s and 1870s when there was a commercial incentive to provide 'evidence' of the supernatural. As Bloom explains, "The literary gothic tale ... had to be re-invented, as we have seen, as the domestic ghost tale, [which] could not have happened without a radical shift in people's attitude to the dead, no longer skeletal and other but now spiritual and familiar" (p. 141).

By the end of the 19th century, short fiction had all but abandoned realism. In its place, short story writers adopted Impressionist and Modernist techniques drawn from the corresponding art movements (Agrell, 2004, p. 1), allowing the form to once again resemble poetry or fable more than prose fiction. In other words, the short story once again adapted its form in response to social and cultural shifts to capture reality in a uniquely compressed way. May (2002) argues that the short story has, from its beginning, been "a hybrid form that combines both the metaphoric mode of the old romance and the metonymic mode of the new realism" (p. 72). This hybridity, however, makes the short story difficult to pin down, and renders it nearly impossible to establish a universally agreed upon definition. Hanson (1989) identifies "one of the earliest specimens of serious short story criticism" (p. 3) as Edgar Allan Poe's 1842 review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, and suggests that Poe's argument on behalf of short stories has not lost ground despite changes to the form. In his review, Poe attempts to set parameters for the short story's length by claiming it should be read within a single sitting or within "one to one and a half hours" (1842/1984, p. 571). Poe's assertion that the short story must achieve a "unity of impression" (1846, p. 163), within a limited scope, emphasises the importance of technical precision – an idea that remains influential in short story scholarship. Patea (2012) confirms that Poe, as the first short story theorist, "brought into discussion issues of form, style, length, design, authorial goals, and reader affect, developing the framework within which the short story is discussed even today" (p. 3).

Arguably, any attempt to arrive at a single definition of the short story – one that encompasses the wide variety of genres and forms that the short story can take – will prove fruitless. Agrell (2004) confirms that “the theoretical enterprise of defining the short story is often tried, but [has] always failed – and it must fail ... because no theoretical definition could correspond to the historical changes of the genre” (p. 2). For Agrell, the short story’s ambiguity and hybridity are strengths of the form rather than limitations. Consequently, as short stories become increasingly fluid and adaptable, their resistance to rigid definitions allows writers to experiment with content and form, ensuring the genre remains relevant and responsive to diverse social and cultural contexts. As Pasco (2019) observes,

every time critics and theoreticians reach a modicum of agreement, some writer apparently takes it as a challenge and invents a contradiction to disrupt our comfortable meeting of minds. Certain poststructuralists have used the lack of really firm definitions, the absence of universally accepted conventions, the difficulty of firmly establishing an undeviating external reality, to justify denying importance to all but the reader. (p. 10)

Like weird fiction, short stories evade definition and mirror the trends of the time – the social, cultural and political philosophies of the world in which they are written. The short story is the ideal form for a genre as amorphous and unstable as weird fiction.

In short, it’s weird: Short fiction and the weird affect

Miéville (2012b) originated the term ‘weird affect’ when he claimed that “the weird is the assertion of that we did not know, never knew, could not know, that has always been and will always be unknowable. The Weird Affect ... works through radical otherness, a counterposing alterity” (p. 380). In his study of weird fictions published between 1832 and 1937, Newell (2020) argues that affect and metaphysical speculation are intertwined. Newell builds on Miéville’s theory to argue that disgust is a central element of weird fiction. For Newell, “weird fiction is metaphysically rather than socially oriented”, with the genre attempting “to access a form of reality [that is] difficult to cognise” (p. 5). Similarly, Lee (2022) argues that weird affectivity shines a “spotlight on atmospherics, feelings, intensities, moods, and generally the non-representational aspects of our daily experiences” (p. 18), suggesting that when subjects are suddenly exposed to bizarre and extreme behaviours or events, the result resembles an affective contagion.

Joshi (1990), a leading critic of the weird, argues that the weird’s ability to “refashion ... the reader’s view of the world” is crucial to the genre’s intent (p. 118). Joshi suggests that weird fiction “must touch the depths of human significance in a way that other literary modes do not” (2015, p. 2). For Joshi, weird fiction does this, not through gratuitous shock, but by using the supernatural as a metaphor to explore various ideas about the universe and life. Weird fiction’s expansive tendency conveys to its audience that reality is “richer, larger, stranger, more complex, more surprising – and indeed, ‘weirder’ – than common sense would suppose” (Freedman, 2013, p. 14). Accordingly, for readers, “there is a certain attraction to the weird

which not only undercuts anthropocentric outlooks but undoubtedly suggests that there is so much more than the human subject understands” (Dodd & Germaine Buckley, 2021, p. 6). Interestingly, Joshi (2015) criticises weird authors who concern themselves with the minute details of the mundane lives of mundane characters in order to lay the groundwork for the sudden intrusion of the weird into the familiar. “Weird fiction,” Joshi says, “should not be about ordinary people” (p. 7). To illuminate his point, Joshi points to Ramsey Campbell’s work as an example of this phenomenon, dismissing Campbell’s novels as “much less compelling than his short stories” due to the insipid details of their “wholesome, middle-class characters and their charming little children” (p. 7). In Joshi’s view, weird fictions that either dispense with ordinary characters, or relegate them to minimal roles, intensify the story’s weird affect.

Arguably, the weird short story does not permit the same depth of character exploration as the weird novel [5], and so readers of the short-form weird are compelled to focus on the work’s most troubling aspects, which often centre on “[one’s] relationship to the cosmos – to the unknown” (Lovecraft, 1921, p. 3). Lovecraft – who himself never wrote a novel – attributed this effect to momentary suspensions of the limits of space and time. He reflected that “the reason why *time* plays a great part in so many of my tales is that this element looms up in my mind as the most profoundly dramatic and grimly terrible thing in the universe. *Conflict with time* seems to me the most potent and fruitful theme in all human expression” (1937, p. 8). Indeed, in Lovecraft’s ‘The Shadow Out of Time’ (1936), the narrator recounts the experience of suddenly collapsing in 1908 and waking five years later with the disturbing dreams and memories of an alien mind and a consciousness able to traverse space and time. ‘The Call of Cthulhu’ (1928) evokes a mounting sense of dread as the narrator scrambles to piece together the events surrounding the mysterious deaths of his uncle’s crew and the discovery of an ancient, eldritch God whose awakening could end the world. While time operates differently in these two stories, both convey a sense of urgency to survive against cosmic forces – an abstract race against time. This urgency is intensified by the limited time and space of the short story form itself. Indeed, Lovecraft provides only the details essential to the characters’ motives, maintaining a tight focus on the problem at hand and the imminent consequences should the characters fail. In contrast, longer forms such as the novel offer ample room for exposition and resolution, arguably making it difficult to sustain the same sense of temporal urgency from beginning to end.

Joshi (2015) argues that the weird has become commercially popular and “literarily problematic”, thanks to “talentless hacks” (pp. 6–7). His position stems from a growing concern that modern weird writers increasingly rely on meticulous details to explain the oddities of their narrative world and to foster reader sympathy for the weird aspects therein, ultimately diminishing the story’s weird affect. In other words, the commercial demand for novels over short story collections, coupled with the difficulty of maintaining weird scenarios in a novel-length work, means that weird stories have lost much of what makes them weird, making it difficult to classify them as weird works at all. Certainly, Joshi (2015) maintains that it is rare for a genuinely weird situation to be explored in a novel, recalling Poe’s assertion that “brevity must be in direct ratio to the intensity of the intended effect” (1846, p. 164). In other words, “all intense excitements are, through a psychal necessity, brief” (p. 164). In Poe’s most notable

short story ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ (1839) an unnamed narrator visits his childhood friends, the twins Roderick and Madeline Usher, at their ancient, decaying mansion. The narrator arrives to discover the twins are afflicted with a mysterious disease that soon kills Madeline and leaves Roderick in a state of paranoia. Evans (1977) argues that Poe structures the story in an unconventional way, de-emphasising events that would typically be foregrounded, such as Madeline’s death [6]. For Evans, the story has exerted a “powerful impact on several generations of widely different sorts of readers” (p. 140) because Poe borrows heavily on techniques from lyric poetry, where imagery and symbolic metaphor produce a “whole greater than its parts” (p. 144).

The renewed popularity of weird fiction has been accompanied by an increase in adaptations of early weird short stories into novels and films, notably those of Poe. Over the past 60 years, Poe’s works have been adapted extensively, with the iconic 20th century American actor Vincent Price starring in seven Poe adaptations between 1960 and 1964. More recently, horror director Mike Flanagan adapted ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ into an acclaimed television miniseries of the same name (2023), while T. Kingfisher reimaged the story in her award-winning novella *What Moves the Dead* (2022). Kingfisher’s retellings of classic short tales and stories, including the ‘Sleeping Beauty’ fairytale in *Thornhedge* (2023), and Algernon Blackwood’s ‘The Willows’ in *The Hollow Places* (2020), have received multiple awards. However, the weird affect of Poe’s original is less pronounced in *What Moves the Dead*. The novella introduces extensive detail and explanation to the story’s key events, eroding its sense of mystery and dread. Kingfisher herself seems to be aware of this. After reading Poe’s short story, she (2022) reflects, “it’s short, and while there’s a lot to be said about economy of storytelling, I found myself wanting more. I wanted explanations ... I wanted to know about Madeline’s illness and why Roderick didn’t just move” (p. 171). Yet, in answering these questions, Kingfisher arguably robs Poe’s story of its atmospheric mystery and narrative subtlety. Rather than allowing readers to think critically about the story’s meaning, Kingfisher makes the subtext explicit. While Kingfisher’s narrative explanations remain ‘weird’, the story’s ‘electric shock’ is rapidly neutralised and even resolved. Newton (2010) confirms that weird stories that aim to unsettle, shock or induce “sympathetic shudders ... must be brief, because the effect is so tentative, so tenuous, their enchantment so fragile” (p. xx).

Conclusion

The insights and ideas offered above demonstrate an undeniable connection between weird fiction and the short story form. Patea and May’s works, in particular, reveal that the short story has consistently evolved over time, adapting and expanding in definition until it inevitably evades categorisation. Indeed, it is this ambiguity that makes the short story the ideal vehicle for weird fiction. Restricting the weird to clear criteria remains futile because it is a genre that is always adapting; it is more of a shifting miasmic cloud than something that can be confined in an organised container. Nonetheless, we can recognise how and why the weird experiences periods of popularity, since its episodic resurgence reflects the crises of the times. Thus, while the brevity of the short story clearly aligns with the weird’s affective potential, further research

is needed to determine whether short-form weird fiction resonates most with contemporary readers or merely reflects the preferences of its authors.

Notes

[1] The forty-year interval between the old weird and the new weird is generally understood as a transitional phase in which the genre was under “construction” (Noys & Murphy, 2016, p. 125). During this period, weird writers further experimented with genre or attempted to transplant Lovecraft’s mythos into their own stories, with varying success.

[2] Interestingly, these assertions have since been contested by Jed Mayer (2018), who argues that weird fiction can be traced back even earlier to Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). As Mayer suggests, “while it is often described as the first science-fiction novel, *Frankenstein* might be better described as the first weird tale ... The horrors evoked in the narrative reflect anxieties concerning lack of boundaries, of the weird hybridities that are the unintended consequences of our actions” (2018, p. 229).

[3] As Fisher (2016) puts it, “Certainly, when it comes to fiction, the very generic recognisability of creatures such as vampires and werewolves disqualifies them from provoking any sensation of weirdness” (p. 15).

[4] Ferguson (1994) acknowledges that there is no single characteristic or cluster of characteristics that separate the short story from other forms of fiction. Nevertheless, drawing on definitions employed by other theorists, Ferguson attempts to establish logical and distinct definitional parameters. Specifically, Ferguson proposes that “short stories are defined in terms of unity, techniques of plot compression, change or revelation of character, tone, [and] lyricism” (p. 218). Ferguson rejects the idea that short stories are defined simply by their brevity, adding that “techniques such as limiting point of view, constructing elliptical or metaphoric plots, [and] using representative details for setting and character development” (p. 226) all work together to create a stylistic foregrounding that may be absent in longer forms.

[5] This idea is supported by Hanson (1989), who argues that the short story relies on implication rather than explication, and by May (2002), who stresses that the economy of the short story demands that characterisation remain tightly bound to a single narrative arc or thematic focus.

[6] It is not lost on Evans (1977) that the short story principles that Poe outlined in his *Twice-Told Tales* reviews (1837) are largely absent from Poe’s most influential and widely read story, ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’, published only two years later in 1839.

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