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**THE AESTHETICS OF DEATH
IN THE SHORT STORY**



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Introduction

When asked to comment on their choice to bring their contribution to world literature in the form of short prose narrative, many practitioners talk about the elusive nature of the short story, about the sense of relationship it creates between the reader and the writer, and about its capacity to show glimpses of man's limitless imagination. Although none of the writers asked to define the genre they work with is able or even willing to provide a strict or a very accurate definition, all of them agree that the short story is the most condensed literary creation, an active form of artistic expression that "screams its definition as it writes its own story."¹

Ever since the nineteenth century, when a handful of writers decided to embrace the 'minor' genre, as it used to be called, which was becoming increasingly popular in magazines and periodicals, the short story has been a 'space' of experimentation with language, narrative structures and unconventional themes. If some writers regarded short story writing as a secondary occupation, their short stories containing but elements of their longer fiction in a concentrated, polished form, there have been others, however, who chose the genre to represent them. Nevertheless, authors belonging to both of these categories have proved that the short story, even in its most confounding form, offers an aestheticized version of an even more puzzling reality. Through short story writing the artist reaffirms his/her presence and attempts to reconstruct his/her own identity by breaking the boundaries of language and instilling in it a sense of intimacy and immediacy between the author as creator of a fictional version of the world and the reader.

From Bakhtin's perspective, in the process of creation language in its totality becomes the discourse of an author-creator who exists both outside

¹ Maurice A. Lee, ed. "Introduction" to *Writers on Writing: The Art of the Short Story*. Westport: Praeger, 2005.

and inside the text. The author-creator is not, however, the individual whose existence is inscribed within the coordinates of historical time and space, but an artistic, creative self that makes his presence felt throughout the whole work. Thus, the fictional world the author creates in his writing is based on a subjective perception of the external world, but it nevertheless contains “parts of one and the same objective world, seen and portrayed from one and the same authorial position.”² Likewise, the literary text becomes a “double-voiced discourse”³ in which the author’s expectations, disappointments, anxieties, etc., are rendered with great aesthetic sensibility. It is no wonder, then, that man’s greatest tragedy – death – has become one of the main preoccupations of artists of all times.

From Antiquity to modern times death has been represented by artists in the most various ways. In late Antiquity, for example, death was evoked in the visual arts by the idea of repose and insensibility. In the Middle Ages, on the other hand, the *artes moriendi* either illustrated the rituals that needed to be performed for the salvation of the soul, or relied on the macabre images of the human skeleton and decomposing bodies. The Renaissance came with yet another change. The rituals performed for the salvation of the soul continued to be represented, especially in the visual arts, but this time the ceremony that took place in the bedchamber of the dying was represented as a confrontation of the supernatural forces that claim possession over the soul of the dying man. In Renaissance literature death becomes part of the artistic discourse more than ever before and death symbolism and erotico-macabre themes are often used to express man’s anxieties over the uncertainties of human existence.

Starting with the eighteenth century, art and literature showed an increased interest in the association of love and death. Death was no longer perceived as a subtle presence, but as a mighty force “which tears man from his daily life, from rational society, from his monotonous work, in order to

² Mikhail M. Bakhtin. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Trans. by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 71.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 183-185.

make him undergo a paroxysm, plunging him into an irrational, violent and beautiful world.”⁴ In the artistic representations of the individual confronted with the inevitability of his own death, Eros and Thanatos are presented as complementary, yet opposing forces whose battle for sovereignty is so violent that the individual starts to perceive his own death as a desirable end. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, the characteristics of death were more or less reduced to beauty in literary representations. Death was still portrayed as a painful experience, especially for the observer, but the horrors of physical death and decomposition were given an extraordinary aesthetic value.

The aforementioned ideas entitle us to believe that there is no standard way to represent death in literature, but, as Philippe Ariès suggests, there is an intimate connection between man’s attitude towards death and the way it is represented in art. Thus, while also taking into account the assumption that the finished product of an artist is an expression of an inner need that “has been met by creating something that can be shared with others,”⁵ we have endeavoured to comment on seven short stories from different cultures and centuries in order to show how the theme of death has always been revisited and reinvented across cultures and through time. Nevertheless, because the modern short story came into existence in the early nineteenth century, we have chosen three short stories from the nineteenth century, namely E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “The Sandman,” Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” and Leo Tolstoy’s “The Death of Ivan Ilyich,” and four belonging to representative authors of the twentieth century, such as William Faulkner with his anthologized short story “A Rose for Emily,” Mircea Eliade and “With the Gypsy Girls,” James Joyce and his famous short story “The Dead,” and Jorge Luis Borges with “Shakespeare’s Memory.”

According to E.D. Hirsch Jr., there are two distinct moments in the interpretation of a literary text. The first one is divinatory, for it relies on

⁴ Philippe Ariès. *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From Middle Ages to the Present*. Trans. Patricia M. Ranum. London: Marion Boyars Publishers, Ltd., 1976, p. 57.

⁵ Leo Schneiderman. *The Literary Mind. Portraits in Pain and Creativity*. Eastern Connecticut State University, 1988, p. 21.

intuition and sympathy, but it nevertheless opens the path towards the second one, the critical moment, in which the ideas grasped in the first moment are submitted to “high intellectual standards by testing [them] against all the relevant knowledge available.”⁶ Obviously, most of the short stories selected for interpretation have received a considerable amount of critical attention, but it is also true that, although the meaning of a text may not suffer substantial changes from one reading to another, its significance, however, depends on the reader’s cultural and historical background. Moreover, given the evolution in time of literary trends and philosophical perspectives, new and challenging ways of perceiving and interpreting a literary text may always arise.

The idea of commenting on memorable short stories, belonging to different centuries and cultures, but which have become ‘immortal’ through the theme of death, has led us to consider the aesthetic ‘mode’ as more suitable for our endeavour. Aesthetics as a philosophical discipline sprang at full speed in the eighteenth century and quickly became a subject of major interest for philosophers belonging to the most various schools of thought. A permanent connection between aesthetics and literary theory, however, has not been established until the last decades of the twentieth century, when the importance of discussing the aesthetic value of a literary text has finally stopped being a subject of debate among critics.

In its narrowest sense, aesthetics is a philosophical discipline that deals with the nature of beauty, art and taste. The term was first introduced by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and it acquired new implications and nuances with each philosopher that ever approached it. In Baumgarten’s vision, aesthetics was meant to solve the conflict between taste and philosophical contemplation, and yet, his idea of aesthetics is far from the current understanding of the term as a theory of art based on the concepts of beauty and ugliness. The philosopher states that “aesthetics (as the theory of liberal arts, as inferior cognition, as the art of beautiful thinking and as

⁶ E.D. Hirsch. *Validity in Interpretation*. London: Yale University Press, 1967.

the art of thinking analogous to reason) is the science of sensual cognition,”⁷ but fails to demonstrate that the theory of arts emerges from sensual cognition. He nevertheless succeeds in deviating his peers’ attention from the pure rational cognition endorsed by Descartes. He rejects the idea that reality consists of series of objects that can be categorized and generalized according to strict, rational rules, and claims that one can fully grasp the richness and the complexity of reality and, therefore, of the individual, through sensual perception.

The next philosopher who dedicated a great amount of time to the development of an aesthetic theory is Johann Gottfried von Herder. He, like many of his contemporaries, saw the lack of artistic genius in the eighteenth century Germany and exerted himself to elaborate a comprehensive theory of art which would work towards understanding the nature of art and the necessary conditions for it to thrive. He recognized the value of the new philosophical principles advanced by Baumgarten for a reconsideration of art, but he showed a strong discontent with Baumgarten’s fondness for standards, which originates in the latter’s rationalist formation. Baumgarten’s aesthetic principles were more or less meant to lead to a standardization of beauty and taste, in which case, Herder argues, aesthetics could no longer be what it declares to be – a science of the feeling, relevant for the eighteenth century philosophical framework, but relying on the simplicity of Greek philosophy:

“I desire [...] a Greek aesthetics. And such an aesthetics – how it would fetch everything from the depths of our feeling, how it would draw on sensation and from it extract the glorious spirit. It would philosophize within the human soul like a swimmer half submerged beneath the sea. Home’s *Principles of Criticism* [...] augmented by the psychology of the Germans and then returned to *that* nation which has remained, in its

⁷ Quoted in Kai Hammermeister. *The German Aesthetic Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 7.

doctrines of the beautiful, whether in art or in letters, most true to the feeling for Nature, then *hellenized* in line with this people's feeling for Nature – now that would be aesthetics!”⁸

If Baumgarten placed empirical psychology at the core of the new philosophical discipline, without disregarding its rationalist roots, Herder applied a historical and cultural approach to aesthetics, arguing against the idea that art can be interpreted in terms of pre-established standards. Obviously, the aesthetic principles advanced by both of them aroused many other philosophers' interest, but it was Immanuel Kant the one who successfully combined all these principles into a theory of taste that shifts the attention from the object to be judged to the judging mind, and therefore to the judgment about the object.

In his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Kant sets the principles for different kinds of aesthetic judgments according to the types of pleasure they generate. He distinguishes between the beautiful and the sublime as aesthetic categories that may become the object of pure aesthetic judgments and claims that the satisfaction in either of the two must be disinterested, with respect to its *quality*, accompanied by a claim of universal validity, with respect to its *quantity*, consentaneous with the principle of subjective purposiveness, as concerns its *relation*, and it must be regarded as a necessity in order the fulfil the criteria of *modality*.⁹

Kant's third *Critique* has been a highly influential work ever since its publication and with the advancement of the idea that the value of an artistic representation does not depend on its capacity to illustrate beauty, but on the artist's capacity to beautifully illustrate “things that in nature would be ugly or displeasing,”¹⁰ Kant laid the foundation of modern aesthetics.

⁸ Johann Gottfried von Herder. *Selected Writings on Aesthetics*. Trans. Ed. Gregory Moore. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006, pp. 49-50.

⁹ Immanuel Kant. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Eds. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 130-131.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

Although nowadays aesthetics has come to be understood as a theory of arts based on the concepts of beauty and ugliness, and although death has been approached by various philosophers, the principles of the aesthetics of death have not been clearly delineated by any philosopher, which is why we have taken the liberty to shape an aesthetics of death by combining the principles exposed by Kant in his third *Critique* with those advanced by Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas on the Sublime and Beautiful*, as well as with Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's debate on dreadful descriptions of death in artistic representations, included in his essay "How Ancients Represented Death."

Despite the many similarities between Kant's and Burke's ideas on the sublime and the beautiful, Burke's approach to aesthetics is empirical, in the manner of John Locke and David Hume, but also psychological and physiological. Both Kant and Burke emphasize the superiority in point of intensity of the feelings generated by the sublime, claiming that the beautiful simply pleases, whereas the sublime is that "which pleases immediately through its resistance to the interest of the senses."¹¹ They both agree that the sublime culminates in a state of absolute delight with more or less negative connotations, but if Kant claims that it is precisely the faculty of reason that which is activated whenever the human mind is confronted with something as immeasurable and powerful as the experience of the sublime, Burke focuses on the physiological response to the sublime and on its subsequent effect upon the mind of the observer.

Starting from the idea that there is nothing more intense than the feelings caused by pain, danger, sickness and death, Burke introduces these instances as potential sources of the sublime, insisting on the fact that the sublime emerges only from the *ideas* of such instances, and not from their physical equivalents. And yet, in an aesthetic experience the ideas of pain, danger and death cannot be apprehended as an objective reality, but as concepts subjectively attached to man's consciousness, for only in this

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

situation can they lead to a sort of gratification through sympathy, which is in fact the result of a special disposition of the mind that allows us to put ourselves in the place of the man affected by the actual instances of pain, danger or death.

Sympathy, as a means of substitution, is the principle upon which literature and other arts become sources of delight even when they dwell on terrible passions. In literature, for example, satisfaction is derived either from the comfort we take in thinking that the story we are reading is fictional, or from the feeling of independence we momentarily experience when we understand that our own condition is much better than the one of the characters we are reading about. Pain, danger and death, the “king of terrors,”¹² as Burke calls them, thus become sources of pleasure and, consequently, they and their artistic representations can be treated as objects of pure aesthetic judgments.

For Lessing, on the other hand, death is nothing more than an interruption of life, a conceptual end, devoid of subjectivity, and therefore with no aesthetic values. And yet, the progressive action towards death, towards non-existence, becomes a source of the sublime if we were to judge sublimity according to the level of terror generated by the idea of dying: “Only to die thus and thus, at this moment, in this mood, according to the will of this or that person, to die with shame and agony, may be terrible and becomes terrible.”¹³

The aforementioned ideas reflect the various ways in which an aesthetic value can be assigned to death. The purpose of our doctoral dissertation is to apply the same ideas advanced by Kant, Burke and Lessing in our interpretation of the aesthetics of death in the short story, while also transcending the aesthetic dimension by relying on Gadamer’s *Truth and*

¹² Edmund Burke. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Ed. Adam Phillips. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 36.

¹³ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. “How the Ancients Represented Death.” *Selected Prose Works of G. E. Lessing*. Trans. Hellen Zimmern. Ed. Edward Bell. London: George Bell and Sons, 1890, p. 212.