

# **The Economy of the Short Story in British Periodicals of the 1890s**

**Winnie Chan**

# LITERARY CRITICISM AND CULTURAL THEORY

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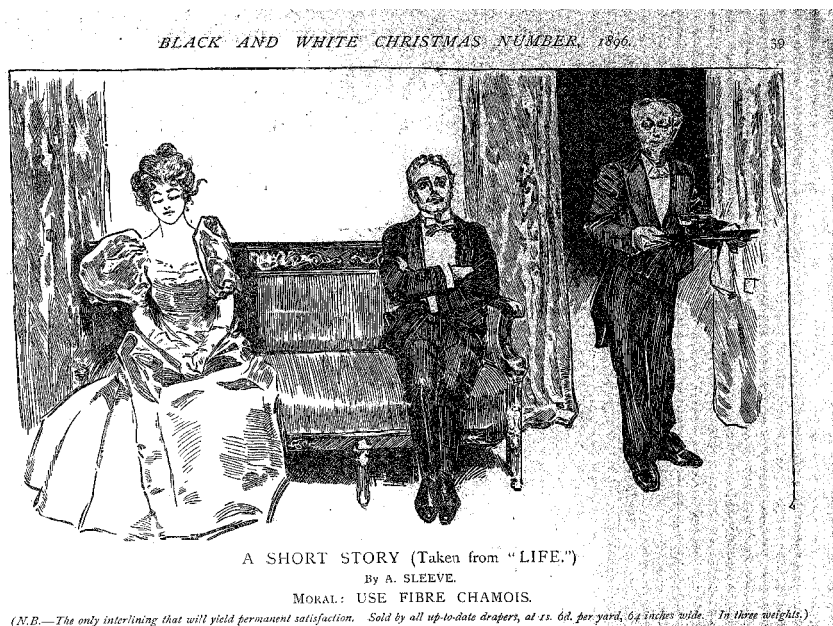
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# Introduction

Over a century since its first appearance, this advertisement for Fibre Chamois plays upon appeals that are as inscrutable now as is the necessity of interlining in a pouf sleeve. In the 1890s, the average reader may not have known how to set in a panel of interlining, but its purpose would have been obvious. Likewise, the advertisement's fashionable appeal to "A Short Story" would not have been lost on that reader, who would have encountered short stories



**Figure 1.** From the *Black and White Christmas Number* for 1896, advertising wrapper, 39.

anywhere periodical print was to be found—and that was just about everywhere. As H. G. Wells later recalled of the decade,

No short story of the slightest distinction went for long unrecognized . . . Short stories broke out everywhere. Kipling was writing short stories; Barrie, Stevenson, Frank Harris; Max Beerbohm wrote at least one perfect one, “The Happy Hypocrite”; Henry James pursued his wonderful and inimitable bent; and among other names that occur to me, like a mixed handful of jewels drawn from a bag, are George Street, Morley Roberts, George Gissing, Ella d’Arcy, Murray Gilchrist, E. Nesbit, Stephen Crane, Joseph Conrad, Edwin Pugh, Jerome K. Jerome, Kenneth Graham [*sic*], Arthur Morrison, Marriott Watson, George Moore, Grant Allen, George Egerton, Henry Harland, Pett Ridge, W. W. Jacobs (who alone seems inexhaustible). I dare say I could recall as many more names with a little effort.<sup>1</sup>

While time had already dulled most of these jewels by 1913, the time of Wells’s writing, his simile illustrates, perhaps unintentionally, the extent to which the “names”—and certainly the work—of short story writers were simultaneously commodified and aestheticized. Beautiful and rare, jewels were also appraised and sold, not to mention increasingly likely to bear a brand name.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the nineteenth century, the growth of the periodical press made short stories a necessity to any periodical with aspirations to popularity. Accordingly, a writer simply could not have made a living as a writer without writing short stories. In an attempt to dignify a professional necessity, some writers sought to elevate this supremely commercialized genre to high literary art. Among such advocates, Henry James noted in 1898, the short story had “of late become an object of almost extravagant dissertation.”<sup>3</sup>

Less extravagantly, the present study reads the short story’s formal and cultural development—of its production, poetics, and proliferation—at the *fin de siècle* against this forgotten debate, waged on the increasingly irreconcilable sides of the aesthetic and the commercial. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, the short story developed in and dominated a literary economy inextricable from the culture its ubiquity engendered. Authors found themselves paid by the word (at the respectable magazines, a little less than a farthing and a half each), while, in articles and books, journalistic entrepreneurs offered advice on how most lucratively to “place” short stories. Customarily published in ephemeral periodicals, the genre necessarily participated in the gimmickry involved in attracting readers for the month or

week, yet from the short story's conventions sprang also the possibilities for artistic distinction sought by aspiring and actual cultural elites. Both pressures left their impression on the genre's poetics as they developed during this period. For example, the "single effect" by which the short story accumulates details toward its conclusion evolved into a defining characteristic. While it facilitated the short story's easy consumption, the single effect was also sufficiently vague in de-emphasizing plot and elevating the "effect" of aestheticist fiction. All the while, the abundance of short stories shaped their identification as a distinct genre. Read in the contexts of the periodicals that published them, "the short story" and the short stories emerge as the product of both mass culture and the backlash against it. The aims of commercial success and literary value became incompatible precisely during the period of the genre's definition—anticipating, hastening, and complicating the "great divide" that has come to characterize modernism.

By reorienting the great divide around the short story and its material history, this study explores how print culture and the politics of burgeoning modernism shaped a literary form that, in its oscillation between mass culture and high art, was in fact emblematic of early modernism. Situating "the short story" in its own field of cultural production, this reorientation bears out what Pierre Bourdieu calls an "economic world reversed," in which commercial success undermines such symbolic rewards as prestige and artistic legitimacy among fellow practitioners in the field. As the short story developed its identity, however, this symbolic economy could seldom extricate itself from the pecuniary one. Reading nearly two thousand short stories in their original contexts of the *Strand* (1891–1950), the *Yellow Book* (1894–1897), and *Black and White* (1889–1891; 1891–1912) during the 1890s, this study delineates how material circumstances shaped the genre's poetics, which, because of their development at this specific historical moment, would embody many of the contrary characteristics of modernism.

The present study thus builds upon recent revisions of modernism that have called into question the cleanness of modernism's "great divide." Since Andreas Huyssen charted this divide in 1986, a generation of critics has rushed to refine and challenge his provocative assertions. The collection of essays on *Marketing Modernisms* prompted critics to reexamine modernists' denial of commercial success. Since then Lawrence Rainey, Mark Morrisson, and Sean Latham (among others) have challenged twentieth-century high-modernist claims to aesthetic purity in their self-fashioning, little magazines, and representations of the snob, respectively. Focusing on the career of Henry James, Michael Anesko and Jonathan Freedman have brightly illuminated the dynamics of proto-modernist culture.<sup>4</sup> Not at all

surprisingly, James figures prominently in the shaping of the short story during the 1890s. Nor is it surprising that the *Yellow Book*, whose “letterpress” depended heavily on James’s short stories, used its anti-commercialism as part of a commercial strategy. Reflecting such sites of its publication, the term “short story” refers not just to individual fictions, but also to the genre and its contested poetics as it asserted itself in the British literary imagination in at least two outwardly contrary strains. Significantly the short story was the only genre to emerge out of these newly antithetical tendencies. Partly because of these origins, criticism on the genre remains mired in questions of definition, even over a century later. Examining short stories published in three influential periodicals of the 1890s, this analysis maps out how the stakes in the field of the short story’s production were established and contested during this period, as well as how they were defined by burgeoning mass print.

Explicitly restricting their fiction to short stories, the *Strand* and the *Yellow Book* each fashioned distinct rules for how and why a short story should be written. Having published Arthur Conan Doyle’s stories of Sherlock Holmes, arguably the most popular short stories ever, the *Strand* had in its first year (1891) secured a dominant position that enabled it to dictate what constituted a successful short story. Three years later, the *Yellow Book* contested this popular assumption, aggressively positioning itself as a generic gatekeeper. To emphasize its allegiance to high art, the *Yellow Book* defined the short story in opposition to those to be found in the *Strand* and its many imitators. Like the *Strand* and the *Yellow Book*, the nearly forgotten but illuminating *Black and White* also adopted an editorial policy of publishing only short stories for its fiction; however, its “enterprise” of bringing the appreciation of fine art to a large readership each week proved an anachronism. *Black and White*’s failure to mediate between the two increasingly antithetical goals and to establish a lasting reputation suggests the influence of this factitious divide. But because of the short story’s ubiquity, these poles marked the field of the short story that fiction writers were compelled to play.

Though published decades later, such titles as *The Short Story: Art or Trade?* (1923) and *The Art and Business of Short Story Writing* (1915) could just as well have been written during the 1890s, when practitioners of the short story’s art and business had necessarily become adept at navigating this polarized field. Neither novels nor poetry nor plays would receive this sort of tortured attention to its aims and poetics, and the short story’s peculiar position in this debate is suggestive. The short story was the only major genre to have developed out of this transformation of the literary field. To study the genre’s definition in the context of its material circumstances is to reveal why

the short story has had, and continues to have, such an ambivalent relationship to commerce and culture.<sup>5</sup>

This ambivalence accounts for the attention attracted by Michael Chabon's recent collections of short stories for *McSweeney's*. Both the *Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales* and the *Chamber of Astonishing Stories* bring together writers of "literary" and "genre" fiction. Between glossy, sensation-ally retro covers, Margaret Atwood and David Mitchell share pages with Stephen King and Elmore Leonard, all of them writing stories in science fiction, crime, and other "genre" modes. Just as interesting is Chabon's revelation about the "giddy e-mails" he received from contributors who "had forgotten how much fun writing a short story could be."<sup>6</sup> Now the province of literary quarterlies and writing workshops, the short story has shed its association with the fun, pulpy magazines of the 1950s. However, Chabon overlooks how those magazines' progenitors from the 1890s offered up not just Arthur Conan Doyle alongside George Gissing, but Arthur Conan Doyle writing serious historiographical stories, as well as the detective stories for which he is known, alongside George Gissing writing domestic comedy, as well as the grim naturalist writing for which he is known. In other words, what makes the *McSweeney's* collections notable now was the norm among late-Victorian periodicals. In their manipulations of cultural capital, the tensions between "literary" and "genre" fiction began to make themselves felt, intensifying as the 1890s progressed. The present study traces these tensions as they developed in the periodical market, which writers could not have avoided.

The booming periodical market of the late nineteenth century abounded with periodicals purporting to specialize in short stories. Promoting what was once a commonly used consumer product, the notice for Fibre Chamois suggests how intimately acquainted readers were expected to have been with the genre's conventions. From the ambiguously named (and probably female) author to its "up-to-date" appeals, from its claim to having been "taken from 'LIFE'" to its customary "MORAL," the advertisement encodes a revealing commentary on a fleeting literary phenomenon that was arguably the period's most influential literary fashion. Nor was Fibre Chamois the only consumer good to advertise itself by hitching its appeals to the short story: by the early twentieth century, Eno's Fruit Salt and Wincarnis's Restorative Wine, among other sponsors, were tipping into magazines pamphlets consisting of short stories in which their products figured prominently.<sup>7</sup> By Christmas 1896, when Fibre Chamois ran its witty little cautionary tale, British periodicals of nearly every description had been publishing short stories, accustoming readers to a genre that until recently had attracted virtually no serious attention in Britain. As the decade drew to a close, the market

crowded with periodicals devoted to short fiction, including, in 1897, *Short Stories* (begun 1893), *Stories* (1897), *Home Stories* (1895), *Complete Stories* (1897), *Favourite Stories* (1897), the *London Story Paper* (1888), *Popular Stories* (1895), and *Striking Stories* (1897).<sup>8</sup> Periodicals that did not advertise their loyalties to the short story in their titles nonetheless featured them prominently, as the periodicals examined here demonstrate; in fact, readers could count on finding short stories in *Badminton* or the theosophical *Longman's Lucifer*.<sup>9</sup>

Developing rapidly throughout the 1890s in periodicals, the mass media of the day, the short story predictably saturated the period's literary culture and commerce. So many periodicals had erupted in the press that, as Wells recalled, even examples "of the slightest distinction" found a place in print somewhere. This demand inevitably declined as the reading public, it seemed, simply tired of the fashion. Writing in 1923, literary entrepreneur Michael Joseph warned pursuers of *Short Story Writing for Profit* that their pursuit had been made difficult by "The boom in the 'nineties' [that] resulted in a surfeit." Joseph speculated that, because of this *fin-de-siècle* glut, "during the last twenty years publishers have fought very shy of the volume of collected short stories."<sup>10</sup> Yet Joseph declines to mention that collected short stories in volumes had been secondary to those published in periodicals, even during the surfeit of the 1890s. Then, a chaotic print culture in transition from Victorian to mass culture produced a vibrant periodical press that engendered a culture of the short story in Britain where none had existed before.

Seldom do literary historians entirely overlook the surge in short stories this change induced, yet histories of the period tend to concentrate on the novel, awkwardly relegating the short story to a minor episode in the novel's history. Since they invariably mention that the novel went into crisis because the institutional structures that had given rise to the Victorian novel had collapsed, this critical neglect belies the magnitude of the cultural change. Among these histories, Peter Keating offers perhaps the most detailed examination of the short story, but he devotes to it little more than three pages in a work that spans over five hundred pages. While he deems the short story "one of the most admired and successful literary forms in modern fiction," Keating ultimately accedes to the prejudices of his late-Victorian subjects, who, as he asserts, viewed the short story as "secondary to the novel."<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Patrick Brantlinger classes the short story with shorter novels as "massified" by-products of the Victorian novel's demise.<sup>12</sup> In her cultural history of the Victorian novel Gail Marshall acknowledges a need to "dea[l] with" the short story. However, she does so in all of two vague sentences, remarking, "The novel

mapped out but also fed, these changes [in the novel] as it experimented with new shapes and forms, and as it found itself challenged by the new popularity of the short story.” In an attempt to elaborate upon this new popularity and its new shapes and forms, she merely reiterates that “the short story comes into its own in this period, enabling experimentation with utopian futures and alternative presents.”<sup>13</sup>

This dismissiveness is understandable in studies of the novel, but studies that concentrate on the short story also neglect to consider the genre in context of its material history. Reacting against the earliest, historically based work on the short story, scholars of the past thirty years have argued for separating the genre’s form from its history. This separation was probably intended to appropriate the perceived rigor of post-structuralism to legitimize the short story as an object of study. But at the same time this maneuver overlooks how the genre’s form and cognitive effects were in fact contingent upon its historical development: the strictures of periodical publication would not have obtained had the historical period that popularized the genre not been so dominated by periodicals. For such reasons, the genre’s emergence into prominence in the late nineteenth century helpfully informs recent revisions of modernism.

As yet, however, little attention has been paid to how rapid and radical changes in print culture—in the way print was produced, presented, marketed, and consumed—affect what were supposed to be *belles lettres*. After all, “Brooksmith” in Henry James’s stately New York Edition is not “Brooksmith” as it ran in *Black and White* in May of 1891, enveloped by a wrapper hawking corsets and pianos, illustrated by engravings that demystify the story’s characters and themes, and heralded by an editorial note in the previous week’s issue alerting readers that “(*The Story for next week will be ‘Brooksmith,’ by Henry James.*)”<sup>14</sup> Considering the short story as a field makes it possible to map out exchanges not just among authors, but also among editors, publishers, reviewers, readers, and the physical text, with its advertisements, illustrations, and editorial gimmicks.

For good reason, then, does the short story’s economy distinguish it as a genre. This identification first gained widespread currency during the 1890s, when the genre’s economy did not just make for a facile pun, for publishers promoted magazines through their short stories and their authors as brand names. The short story’s “economy” is, of course, aesthetic as well. In contrast to the novel’s expansiveness, the short story’s brevity forces writers to compress situation, characterization, mood, etc., into a limited space, resorting to suggestion rather than statement, and limiting the point of view, often to an unreliably subjective first person. Even in the “family” magazines,

the short story at the *fin de siècle* was already taking on characteristics often identified with modernist poetics.

The expansion of the periodical press had begun not long before, in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the repeal of taxes on paper and knowledge encouraged the founding of new periodicals, the production of which accelerated with the implementation of new production technologies.<sup>15</sup> By the end of the century, the extent of this press was enormous, and, in order to attract their share of a swelling middle-class readership, periodicals competed with each other for fiction, which, after decades during which Mudie's Circulating Library had provided novels for all, had become a necessity for any periodical seeking popularity. In the 1890s this fiction was much more often than not short fiction. While the most "eminent" authors could command commissions for serials, the short story involved much less complicated business arrangements than did serials, which required commitments from periodical and author—and, increasingly, literary agent. Rather like interlining fabric, the short story presented a way to have fiction cut into and sold by lengths. Distinguished primarily by its length, the short story defined itself commercially in terms of a word count, which came to occupy a predictable place in most Editorial Notes to aspiring contributors, a fixture that eloquently illustrates the economic pressures on literary production.

By no coincidence did this economy embrace the short story, whose defining characteristic of "unity of effect or impression" persists today; by no coincidence does this definition so self-consciously justify commerce to art while aestheticizing the commercial. The short story was not invented in the late nineteenth century, but short stories of the 1890s defined the genre through practice. This profusion of stories in the periodical press prompted writers to codify the short story's aims and aesthetics. Between 1884 and 1901 Brander Matthews, professor of English at Columbia University and writer of short stories, honed his theory of the short story as an artistically superior genre, first in an anonymous article in the *Saturday Review* and then, after several refinements in other venues, culminating in a short book, *The Philosophy of the Short-story*. Influential writers such as James and Stevenson were publicly debating the intricacies of the form, while H. G. Wells and many others did so anonymously in the innumerable reviews. Interestingly, many of these writers invoked unity of effect or impression, which derives from Poe's theory of the short story, first formulated in 1842 in *Graham's Magazine*. Because the British market did not pay attention to the short story as a serious literary endeavor, this now-influential review did not, when first published, provoke much interest in Britain. Reviewing



Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, Poe argues that a "tale" should unify its effect by accumulating details toward an inevitable—but not necessarily predictable—conclusion, all of which should be read at a sitting, and which constituted the highest of literary art: "in the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one preestablished design."

However, the economic foundations of this enduring formulation are seldom acknowledged. Poe wrote the review as editor and promoter of *Graham's Magazine*. In the same year, he described himself in a letter as "essentially a magazinist," struggling to win for *Graham's* a foothold in the lucrative U.S. periodical market.<sup>16</sup> Recent scholarship has revised Poe's motives to reveal that they were as entrepreneurial as they were aesthetic, but while such claims tend to overstatement, Poe did shrewdly manipulate the literary market of his day. Certainly the "unity of effect or impression" and its "preestablished design" focused attention on artistry, but it just as easily lent itself to short, episodic fiction whose themes can be easily grasped, and which developed consistently toward the end, where lies the preconceived revelation that elucidates all that preceded it. Seen in this way, Poe's dictum promotes periodical fiction made palatable for readers who could not be bothered with the leisurely expansiveness of a novel. Even the review in which Poe chose to articulate these poetics emphasizes his preoccupation with periodical publication: Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* were told for the first time in magazines, a circumstance of short story publishing not to be lost on Poe. Alluding to a previous edition, Poe begins the review by pointing out that "These pieces are now in their third republication, and, of course, are thrice-told."<sup>17</sup> This quibble signals the importance Poe assigned to the material conditions of the genre he would define.

By neglecting this material history, studies of the short story misrepresent both the genre's form and history. The short story as it developed almost exclusively in the periodicals outlines a surprisingly nuanced picture of the changes in publishing, the capitalization of fiction, and the relationships between authors and their readers. Yet critics of the short story often ignore these nuances. While Dominic Head's provocative study of the *Modernist Short Story* astutely observes, "there is a stress on literary artifice in the short story which intensifies the modernist preoccupation with formal innovation," he argues that Joyce, Woolf, and other modernist writers subverted these conventions to achieve a purer, "disunified" form.<sup>18</sup> In disregarding the material, journalistic contexts in which these iconoclastic writers worked, however, Head's argument unwittingly succumbs to self-interested modernist constructions of disinterested artistic creation. Such formalist studies

overlook the form's cultural history, which reveals precociously modernist tendencies that owed nothing to modernism's iconoclasts.

Even studies focusing on the short story's development in nineteenth-century Britain suffer from insufficient attention to the 1890s, let alone its material history. Devoting two short chapters to the decade, Wendell Harris's ambitious *British Short Fiction of the Nineteenth Century* surveys examples of "realist" and "romantic" short stories, loosely organized into a study of influence. Ultimately, the decade's bounty in the genre forces Harris to abdicate even this level of analysis:

So much was happening to the short story so fast that no one at the time could see the new lines of development in perspective, and it is still difficult to map them aright. Lines of influence, for instance, are hard to trace, especially since a significant portion of the exploration and development of the short story was carried forward by writers who never achieved a significant reputation, instead fading from the literary scene by the end of the decade.<sup>19</sup>

The crowded 1890s seem to induce ambivalence about the genre's importance, especially because of the overemphasized association with such short-lived movements as decadence. Harold Orel's *The Victorian Short Story* boldly argues that contrary to American boasts, short stories were popular (or at least published) in Britain throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> However, while Orel's subtitle proclaims "the triumph of a genre," he mystifyingly concludes "that the exploding popularity of short stories in mass-circulation, general-interest periodicals was not inspired by, and not accompanied by, much serious analysis of the aesthetics of the genre by critics, or, for that matter, creative writers themselves." And though his epilogue reiterates that this unconsidered "triumph" occurred at the *fin de siècle*, he complains that "most literary histories of the late Victorian era over-stress the importance of 'decadent' fiction."<sup>21</sup> Orel must have in mind such work as Derek Stanford's anthology, *Short Stories of the '90s*, which focuses on writers like Ernest Dowson and Arthur Symons, and the decadent stories of popular writers, omitting such common iterations of the short story as detective and ghost stories. At the *fin de siècle*, writers mined these models for fresh possibilities in handling action and point of view; readers of the periodicals that published them could not have avoided these reinterpretations.

For such reasons, it makes sense to study the genre in its original contexts. Always published with something else, short stories were and continue to be seldom sold on their own. While it is now common for a short story

to be published for the first time in a volume of short stories, nearly every short story published a century ago appeared first—and, more often than not, only—in magazines and newspapers. Periodicals include so much else that constitutes a fluctuating cultural production, in which any single short story (or article, or illustration) is just one commodity in a *magasin* of literary commodities. Even the periodical's visual and tactile traits suggest its readership. The *Yellow Book* makes an illustrative case: a yellow book, it instantly distinguished itself among the literary quarterlies, an august periodical genre characterized by its stodginess, but all the same a periodical genre that the *Yellow Book's* conductors sought to infiltrate and dominate, not least through its creative refashioning of the short story. Furthermore, a periodical's temporal open-endedness reveals much about how fluctuations in readership, authorship, editing, and publishing shaped the genre. Calibrated weekly, monthly, or quarterly, periodicals make sensitive seismographs of taste and, accordingly, literary practice. The *Strand's* readiness to publish sequels at the demand of its readers, for instance, affords valuable insight into what that monthly's vast readership had grown to expect in a short story.

The following chapters demonstrate how each periodical, representative and often prototypical of its kind, constructs a community of taste most clearly discerned through the short story form that the periodical cultivated. Though the *Strand* and the *Yellow Book* constitute only a tiny sample of the periodicals published during this dynamic decade, the prominent positions they staked out in the field enabled them to exert their influence on entire classes of periodicals, many of them created in imitation. Along with the mostly forgotten *Black and White*, these periodicals published the best-known authors of the period, as well as many lesser-known professional writers who, quite interchangeably, filled pages in these as well as dozens of other magazines. Like them, James, Wells, Kipling, and Stevenson published in at least two of the periodicals examined here, as well as a stunningly broad range of others. Not surprisingly, perhaps, they continue to be recognized as pioneers in modern short story writing. Targeting reading communities rather than “the reading public” from the period's dynamically expanding, increasingly specialized market, each periodical evolved in ways that reveal how its responses to its readers' demands developed a literary genre.

Collectively, the three chapters comprising this study map out the field, spanning the contested, overlapping spaces between mass and elite culture. Here the *Strand*, the *Yellow Book*, and *Black and White* were as representative as they were exemplary. Each chapter situates one of these periodicals as both an economic and a cultural commodity in a *fin-de-siècle* market increasingly stratified by cultural capital. Tracing the short story's

development within this market, each chapter is organized around a materialist close reading of a representative story published at the height of the periodical's popularity. This approach considers a story in its physical context of illustrations and advertisements, within the cultural contexts of the author's and the periodical's reputations. Each of the stories examined thus exemplifies what that periodical promoted as a short story. For instance, while no one story can adequately stand in for the nine hundred stories the *Strand* alone published in the 1890s, the forgotten F. Startin Pilleau's forgotten "Vision of Inverstrathy Castle" exemplifies, by exaggeration, what that monthly's readers determined, through their influential sixpences and correspondence, to be a short story.

Like the *Strand*, the *Yellow Book* and *Black and White* make compelling objects of study because they present such distinct approaches to and markets for the short story. Moreover, aesthetics and economics were often inseparable categories. Each of these periodicals also stipulated, at least at first, an editorial policy of publishing only short stories for their fiction. Surely, as Harold Orel rightly observes, British periodicals had been publishing short fiction throughout the nineteenth century and earlier. However, these periodicals almost never restricted themselves to the genre, and few paid attention to it as a serious literary endeavor. The failure of the *New Quarterly Magazine* in the 1870s illustrates just how alien a short story magazine was to the British market. The magazine's prospectus promised "Two or more Tales of considerable length by eminent writers. *The Tales will invariably be completed in the numbers in which they appear.*"<sup>22</sup> The italics suggest that its conductors (which included a future editor of *Black and White*) considered the short story a special feature. However, unlike the British periodical market of the 1890s, that of the 1870s could not accommodate such an oddity: having published just two complete Tales, the *NQM* abandoned its vaunted policy.

They ordered these matters differently in Britain, where for much of the nineteenth century the periodical press lagged behind those on the continent and in the United States. As periodicals gained a foothold, the typical short story in a British periodical remained somewhat longer than was customary in the United States. Writers of short stories frequently complained that, in addressing a British readership, they could leave little to imaginations accustomed to the expansiveness of Victorian triple-decker novels. Indeed, British periodicals after the fall of Mudie's were accustomed to treating short stories as condensed novels—just as three-deckers were often inflated shorter fictions. In 1891, when the *Strand* and *Black and White* began publication, the same assumptions were at work, but the *Strand*'s phenomenal economic success especially would trigger imitation.

The reversed economics of culture are enacted in this field of three exemplary periodicals, a field that nearly all the canonical writers of the 1890s played. Throughout the decade, writers and businesspeople tacitly recognized that there was prestige to be gained from economic failure, while, conversely, economic success undermined artistic legitimacy.

The *Strand* was conceived to address a heteronomous, unrestricted field. As Stephen Elwell has observed, magazines like the *Strand* succeeded because their creators chose to “define and exploit the common interest of the middle class in inclusive rather than exclusive terms.”<sup>23</sup> In doing so, the *Strand* constituted a formidably coherent cultural production: every issue, every bound volume of six issues, and every deluxe edition republishing the most popular features (usually short stories)—all literally bore the stamp of the *Strand*. This coherence manifests itself in the short stories through their narration by respectable characters and their inevitable culmination in a revelation of the “truth.” Just as publisher and founding editor George Newnes proudly asserted that “I *am* the man in the street,” this most successful of his magazines stressed inclusiveness as an artistic strategy.<sup>24</sup> Of course, this ambitious magazine treated subjects that the man in the street cared about, in ways that comforted and affirmed the man in the street.

Declaring its preference for the Boulevard St. Michel and thumbing its nose at the man on the Strand, the *Yellow Book* marked itself for a restricted, autonomous field. Sold unopened and uncut in an age when such books had already become a pretentious anachronism, the quarterly physically discouraged quick consumption.<sup>25</sup> Reinforcing this posture, the *Yellow Book* published stories revising the genre as it was popularly known into one that aggressively demanded unflagging attention to detail. It is better known today as a source of risqué, pessimistic stories, and while plenty of its stories did depict the moody woes of unmarried men and women in suggestive situations, a conspicuously high proportion of them detailed the subjectivities and torments of neglected artists, as if to express solidarity with pure, rarified art. The *Yellow Book*’s ostentatious exclusivity functioned very much as a commercial strategy that succeeded, at least at first. The magazine endured for three years and thirteen issues, before almost immediately ascending into the cultural hereafter as a collectors’ item, regularly repackaged in anthologies of highlights in which short stories necessarily figure prominently.

In this field of periodicals that restricted their fiction to short stories, *Black and White* struggled for both commerce and culture, attempting to market high (Academic) art to the masses, within a sometimes patchy thicket of adverts for household goods. A weekly newspaper that looked like a cross

between the *Illustrated London News*, a British institution since 1842, and American monthlies like *Harper's*, *Black and White* had lofty cultural ambitions. Economically it rivaled the mass-market *Strand*. In sharing the *Strand's* populist middle-class aims, however, the weekly was also a cultural ally, despite its self-promotion as an advocate of bourgeois artistic elites. While many periodicals aspiring to wide circulations imitated the *Strand* in publishing detective stories, *Black and White* refrained from these, its stories sharing artistic themes with those of the *Yellow Book*, but avoiding scandal. After a false start in 1889, the weekly struggled along from 1891 to 1912, often at a loss, conducted by a tumultuous succession of editors and publishers, trying to be all things and violating the emerging cultural economy. In this muddle of noble intentions, the "complete short story" was commercially appealing enough to occupy a regular place in the weekly's advertisements, yet its completeness also reflected the weekly's profile emphasizing artistic perfection. Ultimately, its most prominent cultural production was one of commercial aestheticism, already an antiquated oddity that would prove untenable in the new reversed economics of culture.

"The Real Thing," one of Henry James's most compact stories, would have been quite another story had the *Yellow Book* published it. Its eventual publication in *Black and White*, however, compelled James to address a readership just as eager as the *Yellow Book's* to associate itself with high art, but without any intent of distinguishing itself as anti-commercial. Had the story been published in the *Yellow Book*, it would likely have devoted several thousand words to caricaturing the types of professional and amateur artist, as well as the middle class and the literary wares it preferred, emphasizing the artist's adversarial relationship to the dominant culture. Given free rein in the *Yellow Book*, James wrote three stories that number among the quarterly's longest items. Each minutely catalogues the indignities of the modern artist. In them James developed that distinctly Jamesian device of probing the subjectivities of a male narrator (an insider who is not himself an artist) worshipping at the feet of a master. As such, James's stories for the *Yellow Book* depict the master struggling with selling out and with the perils of the marketplace that kill the artist. Executing this plot, "The Death of the Lion" fittingly heads the first issue of the *Yellow Book*, whose chief allure for authors seems to have been its reputation for imposing no restraint on length. In his notebooks, James ritually expresses anguish over editors' limits on length and his inability to stay within them, as he did while writing for *Black and White*. There "The Real Thing" ran to only about nine thousand words; perhaps not coincidentally is it one of James's most economically told stories. It would not have found a place in the *Strand*, a place he did not want, anyhow.

These periodicals played distinct roles in a diverse market that developed the modern short story genre—not just its poetics but also the cultural and economic antitheses that the genre continues to negotiate. Perhaps the aspiring elites, with their short-lived little magazines, won on this little field, for the short story's primary economic distinction is that it virtuously “doesn't sell.” As one writer of short stories has observed of her work and the genre to which it belongs, “They're like sitcoms. That's why I wonder why they're not more widely read.”<sup>26</sup> In the 1890s, short stories and the periodicals that published them were not just sitcoms, but also the commercials—as well as the culturally aspirant art that purports to disdain them all.

## Chapter One

# “The Providing of the World’s Thought and Reading”: The Short Story in the *Strand*

THREE CASTLES comes along with another long-continued—shall we say?—chronic complaint against Mr. Conan Doyle, that he does not give us a new series of Sherlock Holmes. Three Castles does not employ any arguments, nor do any of our correspondents who desire the same thing, which we have not already put before Mr. Conan Doyle. After all, the author is the best judge of what work he wants to do, and in any case he is the deciding factor in the matter. We hope that he will continue the series at some time, but when—or if ever—we cannot at present say. In the meantime we are publishing his “Sherlock Holmes,” both the *Adventures* and *Memoirs*, as well as *The Sign of Four* in book form at sixpence each.

(“Answers to Correspondents,” *Tit-Bits* [1 April 1899]: 15)

Notwithstanding its date, this response to what “Three Castles” wrote to the editor of *Tit-Bits* and the *Strand* was no joke. Over five years after Arthur Conan Doyle had tried to kill off his immortal detective in the *Strand* for Christmas 1893, a steady stream of readers’ complaints had run through *Tit-Bits*. A more upscale periodical aspiring to the condition of a book, the *Strand* did not print correspondence, but the literary event so intimately associated with the monthly needed no publicity from other periodicals. It is part of the *Strand*’s lore that, in response, young City men wore mourning bands to work, Doyle received death threats, and the *Strand* lost 20,000 subscriptions. Few if any events in fiction before or since have excited such a response, which, remarkably, was elicited by a short story—a most unprepossessing genre for much of the foregoing century. While it would be ridiculous to suggest that the furor over Sherlock Holmes erupted because of public demand for short stories, the genre’s formal and commercial strictures arguably moved Doyle’s mythopoeia to its fullest expression. The resulting conventions were



instrumental to the *Strand's* populist manipulation and marketing of a theretofore neglected genre into a phenomenon of mass print.

*Tit-Bits'* response to "Three Castles" illuminates how the *Strand* shaped the short story as a mass-cultural form. Just as Sherlock Holmes was inextricable from the *Strand*, so was the British short story in the 1890s. As it developed in the *Strand*, the genre treated readers as consumers, to whose wishes authors deferred. Though the item in *Tit-Bits* claims that the author "is the deciding factor in the matter," this was certainly not the case for most authors; it ultimately was not the case even for Doyle, whom popular demand famously compelled to revive Sherlock Holmes. Likewise, the item's culmination in an advertisement suggests how the *Strand's* enterprising practices led to the genre's widespread popularity as well as its commodification. Yet these decidedly extra-literary considerations focused attention on the short story as an object of literary endeavor, creating a culture of the short story in Britain where none had theretofore existed.

This association tends to elicit different expectations now, given the cliché that short stories "don't sell."<sup>1</sup> Late in the nineteenth century, however, this invariably periodical (and populist) genre would offer writers a convenient means to make a living and editors material to fill blank columns. Even for such an established novelist as Henry James, periodical publication was much more lucrative than book publication.<sup>2</sup> The brevity of the short story and the proliferation of markets for it enabled writers to convert literary wares into quick cash. For much of the nineteenth century, these conditions obtained especially in the United States, where a vibrant periodical press cultivated the short story to a degree of sophistication that continues to prompt critics to identify the genre as quintessentially American.<sup>3</sup> Well into the first quarter of the twentieth century, British writers reflexively conceded their inferiority in the genre. While nineteenth-century British magazines had routinely published short stories, few took them seriously before George Newnes, who had already found fame and a seat in Parliament as a literary entrepreneur, decided to limit the fiction of his most ambitious venture to short stories. When, in the hundredth issue of the *Strand* in 1899, Newnes described its purpose as "the providing of the world's thought and reading," no one could accuse him of overstatement (17: 364).<sup>4</sup> The *Strand* had transformed the British monthly magazine by transforming the short story into a self-conscious genre. Consequently, the *Strand's* interpretation of the short story likewise formed much of the world's thought and reading.

Because of its vast popularity with a large, supposedly indiscriminate public, commentators take for granted that the *Strand* did little to shape

British literary aesthetics. Even Reginald Pound, the *Strand's* penultimate editor, could compliment its contributors only as "pedestrian writers in a non-derogatory sense. . . . Occasionally, they may have raised their eyes to gaze on the summit of Parnassus. Mostly, they remained content with the surer profits to be earned by toiling on the lower slopes."<sup>5</sup> However humble their motives, their lucrative example catapulted the genre to the forefront of literary consciousness. In publishing short stories to the exclusion of serials, long the *sine qua non* of Victorian periodical fiction, the *Strand* initially ran translated stories from the continent, popularizing (at least in theory) conventions of the genre from traditions with long-established poetics for composition and idioms for critique. As British writers from all over the globe found their way to the monthly's pages, many of their stories would explicitly instruct readers in the more active reading practices that, it was so often claimed, such concentrated fictions demanded. In a periodical seeking and finding mass appeal, this educative impulse inevitably revised the short story's status as a literary genre. Popularizing the series of connected but not sequential short stories, the *Strand* made the genre its own and drew to the short story a readership arguably more loyal than any the more conventional serial novel had ever enjoyed.

Governed by the express intention of providing wholesome fiction for the middle classes, the *Strand* evolved and enforced a unique poetics for the short story. Notably, the "unity of effect" that Edgar Allan Poe had remarked as characteristic of the genre was exaggerated into plots unified around a revelation, their complications deriving from negotiations between exposure and suppression of a secret toward an ultimately inevitable "truth," consisting of objective, irrefutable fact. Beyond the detective stories that made the monthly famous, this plot trajectory came to define the British short story as popularized in the *Strand*. This epistemological optimism belies tendencies later established for the short story, whose typically limited point of view foregrounds subjectivity, whose inherently fragmentary form focuses on isolated experiences in isolated lives, and whose bibliographic form is even typified by the fragmentary uncertainty of periodical issue. Building "a British institution" upon fragments of fiction, the *Strand* paradoxically reassured readers that the truth was not just discernible but infallibly so on the threshold of a new century.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the stories' stress on the objectivity of this truth was a populist one, since subjectivities are by definition special. By emphasizing the infallibility of this disclosure, the *Strand* reinforced a truth knowable to all. These conventions were central to the magazine's strategy of inclusion, which constructed an increasingly heterogeneous "public" as its potential readership.