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The implicit in the short story in English

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## Foreword

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# Foreword

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- 1 The current issue of the *Journal* is devoted to the proceedings of the conference on The Implicit in the Short Story in English organized by the *Centre de Recherche Inter-Langues d'Angers* and held at the University of Angers on December 6 and 7, 2002. The aim of the conference was to use the theories on the implicit dimension of language developed by pragmatic linguistics as a basis for developing a poetics of the implicit in the short story in English. The notions of presupposition, the implied, inference, conversational implicatures or the more psychoanalytical notion of the unsaid comprise a range of modes of the implicit which the speakers dealt with. They attempted to determine how these different modes function in relation to each other and, given the high level of cooperation demanded between author and reader in the face of the implicit, how these modes can be integrated into the theory of literary reading. The conference participants spoke to questions such as: where in the short story does the implicit reside? How does the reader construct/deconstruct these sites? To what extent is the implicit intentional or conventional? Can all implicit discourses be made explicit?
- 2 Marcella Bertuccelli, professor of linguistics and author of *Implicitness in Text and Discourse* (Pisa : Edition ETS, 2000), proposes three major categories into which implicit meanings can be grouped - the inexplicit, the implicated and the subplicit. She puts forward the hypothesis that "implicitness is in fact a continuum from surface to deeper configurations of meanings of growing complexity." The idea of a continuum - from an implicit which can be made explicit to an undefinable implicit - will serve as the organizing axis of these proceedings.
- 3 Georges Letissier and Catherine Mari explicate implicit or missing subtexts - what Bertuccelli would call the "inexplicit" - which bring meaning to the works studied, allowing them to be more significantly "decoded". Georges Letissier argues that in *London Bone*, Michael Moorcock wants to "come to grips with one single obsession: London." He demonstrates, for example, that through the use of various narrative strategies, Moorcock "pushes the reader to infer the presence of London even if the story overtly focuses upon another spatial referent."

- 4 Catherine Mari argues that in Colum McCann's *Everything in This Country Must*, "the Irish Troubles constitute an implicit story which occasionally surfaces or, in some cases erupts, showing the depth of wounds which are kept hidden and have manifestly not healed. What's left unsaid thus plays a great part in the three stories of the collection where it accounts for the character's otherwise inexplicable behaviors or reactions." C Mari observes that the gap in the title is filled in the story of the same name: "Stevie and the draft horse were going to die, since everthing in this country must", making explicit that death is the constant underlying threat in the stories.
- 5 Bertrand Cardin identifies the numerous stylistic devices used by John McGahern, especially verbal ellipsis which often has the effect of expressing the protagonist's frustration, and reticence, which conceals an unpleasant truth or expresses a form of decency in the face of such subjects as sex or death. B Cardin reminds readers that McGahern was subject to censorship by the Irish Censorship Board early in his career, an incident which may have influenced the author in his use of the implicit and which may be an indicator to the reader in interpreting the unsaid.
- 6 Martin Scofield uses the term "ambiguous implicit" to describe on the contrary implied stories which are unclear, which cannot be easily "decoded". Teresa Gibert and Susan Barrett both study the ambiguity of the implicit in stories by turn-of-the-century female writers.
- 7 According to T. Gibert, Kate Chopin's "Désirée's Baby" exemplifies maximum implicitness in her Louisiana stories, especially through the use of ambiguous allusions and misunderstandings, and as a result has provoked multiple, even diametrically opposed, interpretations. Chopin's story of miscegenation set in pre-Civil War Louisiana is viewed either as "deeply racist or unequivocally anti-racist". Clearly, the risk taken by the author of excessive implicitness is the risk of being misunderstood. Susan Barrett argues that this has in fact been the case for Barbara Baynton, an Australian writer whose *Bush Stories* were until recently read as "true" accounts of life in the bush. Yet according to S. Barrett, who re-examines the works in the light of feminist criticism, "the apparent inability of readers to engage with the implicit in Baynton's stories stems from an unwillingness to accept her vision of life in the bush", an unglorified vision which questions the myth of bush hospitality. She suggests then that for the attentive reader, the implicit in Baynton's stories is not ambiguous, only subversive.
- 8 Henry James' use of ambiguous implicit in *The Turn of the Screw* results in multiple interpretations, or in what M Scofield terms as "a critical moral panic". The author's "leaving 'blank' the content of 'evil' (as he calls it) in the story as well as the famous ambiguity of the governess's perceptions have given the story much of its power to provoke frequent re-interpretation."
- 9 In their Lacanian readings of Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man" and Pritchett's "Tea with Mrs Bittell", Benoît Depardieu and Jacques Sohier propose different levels or dimensions of the implicit and keys for reading the "deeper configurations of meaning".
- 10 For B Depardieu, Lacan's notion of "interdit/inter-dit" (the forbidden said-in-between) is precisely what is implicit in a literary text in its conscious, preconscious and unconscious discourses. Baldwin's protagonist, a white deputy sheriff named Jesse, suffers from impotence. According to Depardieu, "the whole short story revolves

around the attempt by Jesse at reconstructing his own history and finding the missing chapter, the 'blank chapter', which could explain the present symptom". In other words, the text's implicit works with these stakes at the three levels of consciousness in order to resolve the protagonist's problems of identity in his racially-mixed world.

- 11 For J Sohier, the implicit dimension is inherent in language and consequently some literary texts heighten this characteristic of language. VS Pritchett's short story is read using Lacan's tripartite definition of subjectivity to show that literary reading involves the reader in plural and uncertain quests for meaning.
- 12 On the far end of the spectrum, Anne Besnault-Levita argues that Woolf's implicit does not correspond to an explicit, that it is undefinable, impossible to grasp. "In fact, what 'it' is about in Virginia Woolf's short fictions cannot be recognized or disclosed since the modes of the implicit that 'it' activates require a theory of interpretation which does not imply that signification comes prior to utterance." She argues further: "Not only does Woolf [in "Craftmanship"] suggest that the implicit dimension of words - the natural vagueness and undecidability of language - comes first; she also reverses the usual hierarchy of traditional grammar and of traditional rhetorics and pragmatics according to which the implicit presupposes the existence of explicit semantic contents to which it refers as an origin."
- 13 Each of the conference speakers deals with the question of the intentionality of the implicit - usually focusing either on the intentional or the unintentional implicit though not excluding the possibility of the existence of the other form - and by so doing attempts to determine why authors use the implicit. Whether the implicit be intentional or not, it often serves to avoid censorship, by the public or the publisher in the case of intentional implicit, by the super-ego in the case of unintentional implicit. The use of the intentional implicit can be the result of taboos in a specific cultural context. For Chopin, miscegenation, for Baynton, the recognition of Australian bush women as subjects, for James, sexuality, for McCann, McGahern and to some extent Joyce, the painful political history of Ireland.
- 14 The psychoanalytical approach to literary texts seeks to unveil the unintentional implicit whose function is not only to avoid censorship by the super-ego, but to produce "the pleasure of the text". And because the literary implicit requires the cooperation of a reader, the pleasure extends to him as well, the elusive quests for meaning, according to J Sohier, giving reading an erotic quality.
- 15 For G Letissier, the pleasure of reading is also to be found in *London Bone*. By creating an implicit myth of London with which Londoners can identify, Moorcock appeals to their sense of belonging to a community. And for Woolf, according to A Besnault-Levita, "it is that uncontrollable implicit dimension of natural and literary language which renders human intercourse interesting and intense."
- 16 The Conference on the Implicit in the Short Story in English featured a guest writer, Alistair MacLeod, whom Jacques Sohier and I would like to thank warmly for his enthusiastic participation. The publication of his interview has been reserved for the twentieth anniversary issue of the *Journal*, Autumn 2003, as it will be a double volume whose second section will be wholly dedicated to interviews by the Research Center's guest writers.

- 17 We would also like to sincerely thank Caroline Héroux, Sylvie Esnault, Caroline Mœurs and Caroline Daragon for their assistance in the organization of the conference and the publication of these proceedings.
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