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“Cognitive Liminality: The Short Story as Epistemological Fiction”

Whether in stories of initiation, stories of mid-life crisis (e.g. in the works of John Cheever) or stories of ‘unlived lives’ (e.g. Henry James’s “The Beast in the Jungle”), the short story often closes in on moments in which epistemological certainties (as well as the ethical concepts attached to them) erode. In my paper, I wish to explore the short story’s cultural work as ‘epistemological fiction’, particularly with regard to something one might call life knowledge or “knowledge for living” (Ottmar Ette). Drawing on recent approaches in short story theory and literary cognitivism I will thus look at the “medium-specific forms of attention to life” (Richard Eldridge) the short story engenders. As I will argue in my paper, there are at least three different dimensions of cognitive liminality in the short story: (1) intratextual: the ways in which moments of cognitive liminality/epistemological crisis are staged in the story (e.g. on part of a character and/or narrator/focalizer, through particular temporal structures etc.); (2) experiential: the ways in which short stories often work at the intersections between people’s (and characters’) lives and their different conceptions of it, and how the resulting cognitive insights are (mostly unconsciously) transferred to the reader’s ‘real life’ or ‘non-literary experience;’ (3) extratextual/interdiscursive: the ways in which the cognitive insights (or the erosion thereof) of a fictional story often linger at the thresholds of other fields of knowledge such as history, philosophy, psychology or anthropology.