

## **On the very idea of a short story that got out of control and became a novel?**

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*Abstract.* Shashi Tharoor criticizes R.K. Narayan in the following way: “Narayan’s prose was like a bullock-cart: a vehicle that can move only in one gear, is unable to turn, accelerate or reverse, and remains yoked to traditional creatures who have long since been overtaken.” I think there is a quick defence, which is that it is very unlikely that one can write the different kinds of works he did without being able to significantly change pace; but there is an objection from Joseph Conrad criticism.

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*I went on a bout of sorting*

*Expressing and reporting!*

Pacing, the art of pacing: some have it and others do not. Shashi Tharoor regards the distinguished Indian novelist R.K. Narayan as having little mastery of this art, writing:

Narayan’s prose was like a bullock-cart: a vehicle that can move only in one gear, is unable to turn, accelerate or reverse, and remains yoked to traditional creatures who have long since been overtaken. (2001)

I am disposed to offer a quick defence. Here is some background material before the defence. Imagine that you are writing short stories, of around 1000 to 3000 words. Then you try to write a novel. “I am going to write a novel,” you boast to your friends. Don’t be surprised if the planned novel comes out at double the length of your short stories. That’s not novel

length. You can only become a novelist by learning a different way of pacing the presentation of events.

My defence in outline then is this.

- (1) If Narayan wrote a number of short stories, around 1000 to 3000 words, and a number of novels, he must have significantly varied the pace within his fictions.
- (2) Narayan did write a number of such short stories and a number of novels.

Therefore (by modus ponens):

- (3) He must have significantly varied the pace within his fictions.

I have not specified how high “a number” is, but I think the best explanation for his output is that he was able to and did change the pace at which events are presented, such as by using more description, lengthier accounts of the inner reactions of characters, etc.<sup>1</sup>

But there is an objection vaguely suggested by the early reception of Joseph Conrad. Of his novel *Lord Jim*, Conrad reports:

When this novel first appeared in book form a notion got about that I had been bolted away with. Some reviewers maintained that the work starting as a short story had got beyond the writer’s control. One or two discovered internal evidence of the fact, which seemed to amuse them. (1920: 623)

Who would be amused by that? Anyway, the vague suggestion for this paper is that there is something wrong with premise (1). But I find it difficult to believe that you can produce a novel by a short story getting out of control, except by a strange fluke. You have the skills of a short story writer and you apply them but somehow the work grows and grows into a novel!

I presume this is abnormal at best.

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<sup>1</sup> There are questions such as “What is an event in this context?” which I am skipping past, which is bad. But what about the critic who says that the author only has one gear? Should they not do some of this clarificatory work, rather than throw out underdeveloped charges? Well, regarding my own argument, perhaps the “must” is short of logical necessity; it is just that anything else is so unlikely.

## References

Conrad, J. 1920. Three Conrad Novels. *The Dial* LXIX (6): 619-630.

Tharoor, S. 2001. Comedies of Suffering. *The Hindu* 8 July 2001. Available at:

[http://shashitharoor.in/writings\\_essays\\_details/180](http://shashitharoor.in/writings_essays_details/180)