Key Concepts for Reading Etgar Keret Today

The Short Story Genre

As an author, Etgar Keret has chosen to work in a single genre—the short story. He has published collections of short stories and microfiction, as well as a few novellas that should be understood as long short stories. Furthermore, his graphic fiction is written in this genre and his English-language memoir *The Seven Good Years* also draws on the short story genre. Short chapters, each of which is structured like a short story, compose the memoir.

I need to relate to Leah Goldberg and the appropriate chapter from Einat Baram Eshel’s *Representations of Reality in Hebrew Haskalah Literature* (2011) here. Why this genre?

The well-wrought short story:

It is customary to point to Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (1353) and the short stories it contains as the beginning of the short story genre.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the short story as we know it today took shape. It was influenced by two parallel traditions—allegorical and symbolic language (Nathaniel Hawthorne and S. Y. Agnon) and realism (Guy de Maupassant and Y. D. Berkowitz).

In the twentieth century, the emphasis shifted from the plot (what is related) to the structure (the narrative). Images and symbols began to weigh down short stories; they began to be characterized by the tension between variety and unity, separation and connection, fragmentation and continuity, and openness and closure.

Edgar Allan Poe’s 1846 article “The Philosophy of Composition” first advanced the idea that the short story should have a clear plot and be compressed and unified. In his classic article, Poe asserts that the short story’s literary virtues are surpassed only by poetry. This is due to the genre’s length. Its brevity enables it to effectively exploit all of its components and produce an emotional reaction in its readers, who do not have time to get distracted.

Charles May’s study *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice* (2002) treats the short story, and the American short story of the sixties and eighties in particular. He analyzes the linguistic aspect of the short story and how it influences the way that the short story is understood. He characterizes the short story as a genre that integrates the traditional novel’s metaphorical character with new realism’s metonymic spirit. Due to the short story’s brevity, word choice assumes greater significance in it than it does in longer literary works. Therefore, words do not just express things explicitly. They are also interpreted in indirect, metaphoric, and metonymic ways.

## Viorica Patea, 2012 “The Short Story: An Overview of the History and Evolution of the Genre” The genre relies heavily on the simile, because it strives for intensity, compression, and lyricism. The short story’s inherent lyricism charges its trivial details with intentional meaning deriving from explicit wording, as well as additional implicit and concealed meanings. The short story does not narrate the whole event. Instead, it contends with the fragment and the unique event. It presents fragments of reality that illuminate a single moment of an event. The short story’s epistemology is connected to the nature of the gaze; it derives from a “moment of truth” or crisis in the short story that marks the transition from ignorance to knowledge. Such a reading marks the literary work’s meaning as something dependent upon a moment that will illuminate things in such a way that what is recounted will be understood in a broader framework than that offered by the short, narrated moment. According to Patea, one can say that the short story has a liminal character that ceaselessly attempts to blur that boundary between the known and the unknown, and the surface and what lies beneath it.

## Chronology, narrative, and characters’ motives in the well-wrought short story can all be defended, and they are employed to enable readers to extricate a clear and unified meaning from the text. Keret ceaselessly subverts the well-wrought short story. All of his stories’ discursive components, including the speaker, the characters, social codes and the Hebrew language, revealed as a supportive pillar resting on wandering sands, serve to create a sharp feeling of uncertainty.

## The short story medium suits contemporary culture’s consumers: short texts for a generation with a short attention span accustomed to both short matter-of-fact correspondence and reading on screens, a generation simultaneously drawn in multiple directions by ubiquitous screens, clicking from link to link, and flipping through endless lists of streaming content.

## In his afterward to *What’s Your Story: American Short Stories of Sixties and Seventies*, Moshe Ron writes, “neither the solid ground of value and meaning in relationship to which irony can be deciphered and measured nor a defined teleological perspective in relationship to which it is possible to talk about strategy can be found.”

## Peter Brooks 1994

## The goal or ending is unobtainable. In its absence, or in its perpetual postponement or deferral, the only remaining option is play—creating imagined endings, playing with readers’ expectations for a moment of enlightenment that never arrives, and creating a fictional space of “like” and “it seems” that possesses a clear ending offering satisfaction. When the ending arrives, its character more closely resembles stalemate than victory.

## A changed attitude towards reality, a more sober attitude, has made the status of endings fictive, flimsy, weak, and arbitrary. Plot does not see itself moving towards explanation, resolution, enlightenment, or consolation. As readers, we have become too sophisticated to believe in such structuring. Consequently, plots eschew denouement and things remain unresolved at the conclusion of texts. In fact, ending is not the only literary element that contributes to textual ambiguity. Pastiche-like use of prefabricated structural components and abandonment of thematic coherence play a role as well. Elements of clichés, ready-mades, déjà lu, and all the remnants and surplus of culture enter into the text and are treated as kitsch, camp, or objects of amusement.

## Postmodernism turns its back to realism, and its abandonment of the mimetic impulse is explicit. It openly displays a playful attitude towards fiction, embraces the arbitrariness of narrative, and openly eschews authority. Furthermore, when authors employ traditional techniques, they only do so self-consciously in a parodic manner.

## Minimalist Writing

# **Chantal Duris-Massa [**L'écriture "minimaliste" dans la littérature israélienne : la rupture des années 1990 (?)]

## Minimalist writing was an aesthetics that emerged in the eighties. It rebelled against an earlier model that favored a high linguistic register and took inspiration from the Bible and ancient Jewish texts such as the Mishnah. This model had ceased employing these sources in imaginative ways. Minimalist writing was an aesthetics that wanted to do away with the literariness of the earlier model, because it claimed that practitioners of this earlier model asserted that they could use literature to give meaning to reality.

## Minimalist writing is an aesthetics that wants to speak to the current generation. The narrator and the characters share the same reality as the readers—something that is conveyed through the everyday language that they all share.

## Nevertheless, writing in the vernacular poses its own difficulties. What is everyday language? Since the vernacular is composed of a number of sociolects, which social group does this language belong to? Therefore, rather than saying that minimalist writers employ spoken language in their work, it is more productive to note that they employ a communicative code that mixes elements of spoken language—Tel Aviv slang, I. D. F. slang, and disparate words drawn from everyday life and the trivial vulgar lexicon.

## Although minimalist writers employ language to depict the breakdown of certainty and the weakening of the connections between reality and the words used to describe it, Keret prefers to highlight the gap between reality and language in his writing. In fact, he employs word games to provide his readers with access to reality. Only word games allow one to access a reality disconnected from stable and fixed referents and in this way arrive at snippets of compassion amidst the breakdown of man and the world.

## Through mobilization of a guileless simpleton and his sharp, malicious, and sympathetic power, Keret arrived at what is a simultaneously subversive and collaborative point of view. The simpleton is not conscious of the conventions imposed by society. He has an inherently subversive essence. Keret creates a number of narrator-characters who look at the world from outside. The simpleton can be a child, an adolescent, a young adult, or even a regular adult possessing such a character. People attribute simplicity, precision (like in Anderson’s story “The Emperor’s New Clothes”,) and imagination to children, but they also attribute an animalistic essence to them. In Keret’s work, one finds either the fragile, dreaming, and sentimental child, or the connected, trendy, arrogant, macho Tel Avivan who has seen it all and finds it difficult to grow up.

## Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism (Motti Regev)

## One of the things that makes contemporary cultural unique is how it reflects cultural globalization. Cultural producers situate themselves within global fields of cultural innovation; they place what they see as innovative elements at the forefront of global culture alongside traditional native elements in their work. On the one hand, this continuously updates local culture and keeps it up to date with contemporary cultural trends. On the other hand, it helps preserve Israeli cultural uniqueness.

## Integration of local culture and global cultural innovation creates a cosmopolitan update. Aesthetic cosmopolitanism does not create a unified and homogeneous culture. Instead, it creates similarity and “phenomenological proximity” between cultures.[[1]](#footnote-1)

## Israeli Masculinity

## The Sabra myth. The myth of Israeli masculinity.

## (See Adia Mendelson-Maoz and Oz Almog)

## In Keret’s work, masculine depictions oscillate between portrayals of a heroic masculinity featuring martyrdom and sacrifice on the collective’s behalf and portrayals pointing to this masculinity’s breakdown.

## Sociological generations

## Army Stories

## Adia Mendelson-Maoz argues that Keret’s stories are filled with numerous masculine figures who do not uphold the norms advanced through the Sabra myth. Most of his protagonists are physically weak and they are usually blabbermouths, nerds, or annoying or directionless people. The military does not serve as an appropriate framework for these protagonists’ personalities, but they are legally obligated to function within it. There, they encounter superiors that Keret depicts negatively. These commanders possess stereotypical macho characteristics, and, at various times, Keret present them as crude, poorly trained, bullying, and ugly.

## Many of Keret’s protagonists commit suicide or die after errors or accidents lead to their unheroic deaths off the battlefield. The stories “Kochi,” whose eponymous protagonist is shot by a friend, “Seder halki’ (Partial Order) and “Yuliyah” (Julia) exemplify this. Suicide serves as a defense mechanism in works like “Nylon,” “ha-Kaytanah shel Kneller” (Kneller’s Happy Campers) and “Yamim kemo ha-yom” (Days Like Today). Nonetheless, even after the deaths, those who commit suicide, continue to suffer. “It remains the same, only a bit worse,” (Kneller’s Happy Campers, p. 38).

## Mendelson-Maoz argues that Keret’s army stories are not a form of subversive political protest. Rather, she asserts that their subversiveness has a more humanist character. There are army stories featuring living dead characters that do not possess even a modicum of heroism or courage. The protagonists are delicate, sensitive, psychologically fragile, and physically weak.

## Frequently, these characters are repulsive and irritating. Kochi, Semyon,[…]

## Mendelson-Maoz argues that Keret’s military stories subvert the Zionist myth of the living dead.

They feature antiheroes who die in banal ways and derive no benefit from their deaths, including Kochi who is not even transferred to a new base; they give a twist to this loaded cultural model. They also add plastic descriptions of death and bodily odors. The dead are unsterile and unaesthetic, and their depiction stands in marked contrast to the idealized beauty and purity associated with the original model of the living dead and the masculine form it promotes.

In this way, Keret casts aside official culture through use of irony and sarcasm, removes the cloak concealing the violence, the egotistical motivations, and the brutal power struggles that typify Israeli society, and makes them visible for all to see.

Chronology

A desire to create a New Jew who would work the land found clear voice one hundred twenty years ago, during the First Aliyah, but it arose even earlier. During the forties and the Independence War, a fighting New Jew, who knows how to hold a gun, as well as a plow, moved to the cultural forefront. Uri, the protagonist of Moshe Shamir’s novel *Hu halakh ba-sadot* (He Walked in the Fields, 1947), who sacrifices his life for the collective, exemplifies the heroism and courage associated with this fighting New Jew. Labor Zionist control helped make the 1950s into a collectivist period during which the attractive, heroic and masculine New Jew with his prominent forelock served as a cultural icon. Simultaneously, however, youth more interested in themselves, their own pleasure, and events taking place outside of Israel were beginning to make their presence felt. The prominent Israeli author S. Yizhar nicknamed these youth “The Espresso Generation” and they would find subsequent fame through their depiction in the popular Israeli film *Eskimo Limon* (Lemon Popsicle;1978). An additional nickname that these youths were given in the mid-fifties was the “Transistor Generation,” a moniker that referred to the transistor radios that many youths carried around with them everywhere to listen to music and news from the wider world. During the sixties, the liberalizing trends that began to emerge in the fifties took hold in Israel. One can see the impact that the flower children made on Israeli manhood, and one gets a sense of the changes afoot by listening to the lyrics to the contemporary songs “Ha-Navi Yehezkel” (The Prophet Ezekiel) and “Horoskop” (Horoscope) by the band *Halonot Gevohim* (High Windows). Free love became acceptable and having sex with as many women as possible became a viable goal. Yet collectivism, the strong male, and a battling, conquering, and coarse masculinity found renewed strength in 1967. The famous and highly popular *Life* magazine photo of Yossi Ben-Hannan bathing in the Suez Canal in full uniform, gun in hand, expressed this. Yet this image needed to coexist alongside images from the “Israeli Woodstock” that took place in Nuweiba The contradictions between these two set of images went unexplored.

In 1967, the novel *He Walked in the Fields* was radically transformed when it was adapted for the screen. While Uri dies jumping on a live grenade in the novel, the film provides no information about how he dies; one does not even see how he gets injured. Similarly, collectivism is not what motivates Uri to join the Palmach. Instead, a desire to extricate himself from a personal crisis motivates his enlistment. He does not want to deal with difficulties he is having in his relationships with his girlfriend and parents.

Between 1967 and 1970, the War of Attrition took place. It created an unacceptable status quo with young people ceaselessly dying without any clear purpose. Protest against this status quo found vivid and shocking theatric and lyrical expression in Hanokh Levin’s famed drama “Malkat ha-ambatyah” (Queen of the Bathtub), as well as the song lyrics that he wrote for *Halonot Gevohim*. The war induced a crisis of Israel masculinity by creating cracks in the macho Israeli façade and the sense of unlimited Israeli masculine power. Simultaneously, these years were the heyday of the kibbutzim, which were well-stocked with female volunteers and served as free love hot spots.

The crisis brought on by the Yom Kippur War dwarfed its predecessor. This trauma transformed the Israeli male image. The Israeli male was now viewed as impotent, wounded, traumatized, and shell-shocked. The Sabra’s self-confidence withered and died. A sense of crisis was stark and immediate.

In 1975, there was the first LGBT demonstration in Tel Aviv’s Malkhe Yisra’el [Kings of Israel] Square. Its LGBT demonstrators demanded equality and rights for “Ne’imim u-ne’imot” (the name they created for their community). The demonstrators were mostly immigrants from English-speaking countries and closeted native Israelis wearing masks.

During this time, society alternated between adherence to a heroic masculinity advocating martyrdom and sacrifice on behalf of the collective and a sense that this type of masculinity was no longer workable.

Two to three years after the Yom Kippur war, the daring and highly successful 1976 Entebbe raid brought a belief in heroism back to Israeli society and renewed confidence in Israeli masculinity. The euphoria experienced after the Six Day War returned.

At this time, a new ethos emerged. While the Israeli soldier could fight, he was also sensitive. This meant that even when forced to shoot, he was not blind to harmful consequences of his actions. Hence, he “shoots and cries.”

From this time on, it became difficult to find an Israeli book or film that voiced heroic masculinity as emphatically as the film *Mivtza‘ Yonatan* (Operation Thunderbolt;1977) with its recounting of the Entebbe raid. Thus, Joseph Cedar’s film *Beaufort* (2007) does not tell the story of the heroic capture of Beaufort Castle in Lebanon by Israeli forces. Instead, the deaths of soldiers in the film are depicted as purposeless and the filmmaker eschews heroification.

While machismo is not absent from cultural representations produced in the 1980s, these representations were tempered by the sense that this machismo had bogged Israel down in the mud of Lebanon. High numbers of Israeli soldiers died, were wounded or were traumatized during extended fighting in Lebanon. Therefore, it proves unsurprising that the antiwar *Arb‘a Imahot* (Four Mothers) movement with its distinctly feminine aura arose in response to Israeli military involvement in Lebanon.

In this period, the American counterculture went into decline, and, with the rise to power of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, conservatism achieved ascendance in Western Europe and the United States. These developments influenced the Israeli mood and Israelis became increasingly insensitive to the feelings and needs of others.

The glory days of Tel Aviv’s gentrifying Florentin district were in the nineties when discussions of homosexuality moved to the center of public discourse and the First Intifada brought the Palestinian question to the forefront of Israeli minds. During this period, serious Mizrahi women’s writing began to emerge, and it served as a counterweight to characterizations of Mizrahi women found in jokes and the Boureka film genre. As fissures were forming in the Israeli masculine façade due to Israel’s inability to effectively protect its citizens from terror attacks, North American influence helped give rise to the meticulously dressed metrosexual Israeli male.

The new millennium brought about new developments, including the emergence of a distinct form of Mizrahi masculinity, increased discussion of Israeli minorities, and a rise to prominence of Russian immigrants. The standing of male and female immigrants from Russia rose and their status approached that of native-born Israelis. Israelis began to speak more openly about shellshock, trauma, and crises. Escapism, drugs, and tripping became regular parts of Israel life, and terms like *Tel aviviut* (Telavivism) and *ha-bu‘ah* (The Bubble) came into play to describe an effort to escape from broader Israeli reality undertaken by residents of Israel’s largest city.

Raz Yosef, *To Know a Man: Masculinity, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Israeli Cinema* (2010)

In the film *Echad mi-shelanu* (One of Ours; 1989) the protagonists shout “one for all, all for one” during their paratrooper training, but the film works to undermine the widespread belief that a sense of brotherhood in arms unifies those serving in the I.D.F.

There has been an effort to westernize Israeli masculinity, but Israeli masculinity proves unstable and continually shifts between more primitive and more progressive manifestations.

Etgar Keret—Gathering at Beit Berl College 2017

The stories train us in empathy and bring us closer to others.

Instead of looking to justify others’ actions, they help us understand these actions.

The stories are meant to function like defense attorneys for the human race.

Keret’s stories attempt to draw us closer to unusual people, to bring us into their minds, and to help us find empathy for them.

Keret wanted to write “agnostic Hasidic tales.”

The stories are fantastic, but the feelings they evoke are real.

Yigal Shwartz follows in the footsteps of Zygmunt Bauman and breaks down the protagonists of Israeli fiction into a number of literary types: the passerby, the marionette, the religious pilgrim, the nomad, the tourist, and, in the case of Keret, the camper.

The camper exists in a state of disconnection from the real binding world where one has connections and needs to advance oneself and worry and devote oneself to others. In fact, the way that one engages such real world connections and addresses such needs defines one’s identity. The camper disengages from all this and finds an efficient way to avoid “fixed identity and keep all options open, “ (p. 263). In the eyes of Keret’s protagonists, the world is a summer camp or playing field that has players and rules of the game but no depth and no added meaning.

In this game, there is no necessity. Instead, everything goes, and everything is possible. In the confrontations between human figures and the world, there is neither law nor the absence of law neither order nor chaos. Only the moves of the game, good moves, both more and less convincing moves, exist.

The camper is always found in motion, but he does not make vital contact with the world out of a desire to take pleasure in its delights like the passerby; he does follow a redemptive path that sets his soul on the way towards spiritual elevation like the religious pilgrim; he does not wander out of a joy of adventure only to return to his ordered home after a limited time like a tourist.

The camper moves in a loop, a circular movement simultaneously amusing and frightening, in a virtual spacetime that does not differentiate between reality and fiction, between virtual reality and reality, between signifier and signified.

*Kneller’s Happy Campers*

The Reading Experience (Direktor, 2005)

The story presents an intellectual challenge, because it arouses doubt and confusion. It is not a riddle that has a single clearly defined solution. On the contrary, unresolved plots and ambiguities are an almost inextricable part of postmodernism. In this respect, it faithfully reflects the doubt and uncertainty that characterize the modern secular individual’s existential experience. Not everything has an answer; when there is no legal code offering answers and solutions, steadfastness in the face of uncertainty constitutes part of coping with everyday life.

Everyday life demands that we look at reality properly without fearfully retreating to a place where safe prepared answers are seemingly available. Reality does not give fealty to fiction that turns its back and closes its eyes to it.

What is presented in the process is vacuousness itself.

Therefore, it is both exciting and despair inducing.

Meaning has a dubious value in postmodernism. The artistic work’s interpretive system undermines efforts to formulate coherent and totalizing explanations that give the pretense of providing accurate meaning. The author-God abandons his role as a font of knowledge and a guide who directs his/her readers towards concealed wisdom.

1. This term was coined by John Tomlinson. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)