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## UNIT 4 INNOVATIONS IN STYLE

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### Structure

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### 4.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

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The aim of the Unit is to familiarise you with some innovative styles of the experimental story. You will notice how this new mode dispenses with many of the conventional devices of the short story, and yet is able to provoke and sustain your curiosity and interest.

After reading this Unit, you should be able to

- distinguish between the traditional and the innovative in narrative styles;
- list some of the innovations in style made in experimental stories;
- identify these innovations wherever you encounter them; and
- introduce appropriate changes in your own experimental fiction.

You should also follow up, with further reading, some of the writers referred to in this Unit. This will help you to see what changes they made, and how and why, in narrating short stories.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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The three previous Units dealt with 'anti-hero', 'anti-plot', and 'open-ended narratives' in the experimental story. This concluding Unit seeks to elucidate the different innovative devices and styles that characterize the new story.

There has been so much innovation in the form and style of the short story, especially in the past three or four decades, that there are difficulties in applying the term 'story' itself to much of experimental fiction. The rich variety of innovations or experimentation in style has led to the emergence of a host of alternative narrative forms. Fictional texts, short prose works, pieces, sketches—these are some of the new arrivals on the scene.

The word 'story' seems to evoke too many literary expectations that have been either abandoned or modified in use by experimental writers. The new fiction crusades against a whole range of conventional notions, even if any one single piece does not necessarily oppose all of them. Let us look briefly at a few of these notions, and what

has lately been happening to them, in an effort to understand what experimental fiction is and what it does.

We have already noted in the earlier Units that modern writers reversed traditional modes of story-telling in certain ways. For instance, we have seen how they showed they could do without heroic figures or without plots implying a cause-and-effect relationship between events. We have also seen how they could successfully abandon familiar notions of an ending. Here we will note a few other trends as well.

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## 4.2 RECENT TRENDS IN NARRATIVE STYLES

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Fiction writers of the nineteenth century tried to portray the world as realistically as possible. Characters, situations, events and the paraphernalia surrounding them such as manners, morals, dress, furniture, locale etc. were all depicted faithfully.

Closely related to this sort of depiction was the notion that a piece of fiction must have a theme or subject of sociological, psychological or at least of contemporary import.

Another notion that these writers held was that their fiction must 'mean' something tangible to the reader. Such meaning could be lent to writing by interpretation and analysis of character, event and situation. A short story in particular, it was felt, must have an appropriate length—sufficient to portray character and event, having space for developing the theme, and concluding with the 'meaning' having been made clear.

Writers of the present century experimenting with fiction set about systematically eliminating one or all of the above.

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## 4.3 AGAINST PORTRAYAL OF REALISM AND EVENT

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The dominant mode of nineteenth century fiction was realism. The novel developed this mode to perfection, and the short story followed suit. Such a writer tries to portray the real world 'out there'. He observes life with precision, and seems content to take a slice out of it for fictional representation or treatment. His aim, therefore, is to make his stories credible by a faithful depiction of the world around him.

As life, both individual and social, became increasingly more complicated, realism or the mere portrayal of surface events did not seem an adequate mode to represent it in all its facets. Writers interested in probing the inner recesses of their characters' minds rather than external events per se (Dostoevsky for instance), took the first step away from realism. Hence the turn inward, with characters not only responding to the external world, but also turning inward to look at their own thought processes.

Yet other experimenting writers turned to earlier forms of fiction, such as fable or romance, to recreate fantasy worlds that bore no resemblance to the 'real' world. The types of fiction they wrote laid no claim to plausibility. Instead, they indulged in the free play of the mind, coming up with farfetched tales that seemed to have their own inner coherence in a limited world, circumscribed only by the artist's imaginative power.

Events took a back seat, and so did claims of realism.

Numerous examples may be cited here. Take the Malayalam story, 'The Bear', by C. Radhakrishnan: In it there are some events, but they are only sketchily developed and they seem to bear no direct relation to each other. The image of a bear is first confused with the image of a man in the narrator's mind, then with the image of his father. The reader can guess what those associations mean, but he is not told. The story, somewhat terrifying in its imagery, defies both chronology and normal credibility of plot. The author seems merely to mock at 'what happens next'. Yet the fiction has a certain coherence, deriving its strength neither from events nor from credible characters or plot.

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## 4.4 AGAINST SUBJECT AND THEME

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Closely related to attempts at realism in fiction was the notion that a piece of fiction must have a subject or theme with sociological, psychological, or at least contemporary relevance. Experimenting writers mocked at this as well.

One way they did this was to abandon a tangible subject or theme and convert the very process of making fiction into the real **subject** of their fiction. Asserting **that** fiction is not 'about' some other **world** 'out there' but a self-contained world in itself, they often emphasized the way this fictional world was made. **Metafiction** is one key term used in this respect.

You **may think** of the **Arabian Nights** in this respect, or recall reading **Cervantes's Don Quixote** where the telling of the **story** is an integral part of the story itself. Even the **opening** chapter of **The Mahabharata** where **Ganesha** breaks his pencil but **uses** his **tusk** instead, can be cited as a **case** in point. And to study contemporary **manifestations** of this technique, you can read John Barth and Donald Barthelme, (**Americans**), Borges (**Argentinian**), Gunter Grass or Peter Handke (**Germans**), **Italo Calvino** (Italian), the bilingual Samuel Beckett, **Salman Rushdie**, and a host of others. **Such** writing is often acutely **self-conscious**.

**But** metafiction is not the only way away from subject or theme. A writer can take character, event, **and situation**, **but** not develop them into any coherent theme **or** subject, **while** seeming to report what is happening, and while seeming to avoid **self-consciousness** or overt cuteness. Let us take the example of the Hindi writer, **Awadh Narain Singh** whose 'Intimate', describes an encounter between two strangers on the street, one of whom is the narrator. But it is nearly impossible to paraphrase it any further. The refusal to be paraphrased is one of the dominant traits of this type of fiction. But if one still persists in the face of this stubbornness, one may say that it **reveals** something of the narrator's character and viewpoint, counterposing it with the **character** and viewpoint of the other man he encounters. They **become** adversaries, **come** to blows, and go their different ways. They argue, but nothing is settled in **those arguments**. They are **characters** only in a formal sense, for little is **delineated** of their **character**, especially in **relation** to each other. An encounter is described and **the** reader is left pondering over its meaning. One can call it problem fiction if one likes, **but** it is the fiction itself that is problematic, not the subject or theme it develops.

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## 4.5 AGAINST OVERT MEANING AND EPIPHANIC REVELATION

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**This example** brings us to the next notion that experimenting writers dismiss: that **fiction** must 'mean' something tangible to the reader.

In considering the notion of meaning in fiction, let us step back a bit and look at James Joyce's concept **of** 'epiphany.' Joyce meant thereby a moment or some brief moments in a story that exhibit a sort of luminous intensity, often used to heighten the impact of **recorded** events, sensations, or observations. In the short story or short fiction in particular, the concept is often employed—and by Joyce himself—to give us moments of insight that form the structural core of the heart of the fiction. Frequently, that image or thought occurs near the end of the story, making it possible for the reader to arrive at an intuitive act of understanding, often along with the central character or **one** of the other characters so the story can then end, the reader sufficiently satiated. The whole meaning or significance of the story seems to revolve around that moment of insight, the 'epiphany.' If you are interested in following up this reference, read Joyce's **Stephen Hero** and **Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man**.

Attached is a brief story, 'Games,' by **Reinhard Lettau**, where the writer seemingly uses 'epiphany' only to **mock** it, making it serve a purpose that questions the very purpose for which it is normally **used**. The concluding statement, 'This is a friendly



## The Self-Contained Compartment

Innovations in Style

Michael Goldstein

At the stroke of nine he entered the room and without turning on the light began to undress. Then as if remembering something, he began to dress again. He had noticed, in this time of forgetting and remembering, that something had stirred in the lower bunk, and he could see this stirring through the dimness. It could not be Joseph for Joseph's was the top bunk; it was his own bunk then. But Joseph's bunk was made. He moved stealthily towards Joseph's bunk, which most concerned him. He knew already that his own was occupied, hence his interest in Joseph's. Having reached Joseph's bunk he avoided looking beneath for he knew there was nothing more to discover except Joseph. He felt Joseph's bedlinen and found it cold and what is more, empty. He thereupon closed the door on the room. He did not lock the door; he had only infrequently to unlock it and he accepted that it was always Joseph who locked it but never questioned Joseph on this matter.

At the stroke of nine the next morning he returned and unlocked the door, which to him meant that Joseph had returned and retreated for if Joseph had not returned it would be free as he had left it. So Joseph must be out after returning, unless Joseph had locked himself in, which he never did.

Meanwhile he had undressed and entered his own bunk which was empty but warm. This meant nothing, for Joseph often sat on his bed to put on his shoes and this Joseph might have done after returning and before leaving. He slept, or rather kept to his bed, both morning and night for several days. On one morning he thought he saw Joseph putting his shaving things away. On one evening he thought he noticed Joseph above him. But he never thought or imagined that he noticed or saw anyone but Joseph. At last, after convincing himself that this could not be otherwise, he dressed and went, leaving the door unlocked as Joseph had done. For Joseph, as yet, had never locked him in.

Later that evening he returned and without turning on the light began to undress as was his habit. Then as if remembering something that he had failed to do before undressing, dressed again and left the room locking the door. He wanted to think. If he was to share his bed he wanted to think. For one night it was only slight inconvenience, but what if it were the beginning of many nights?—but he could not sleep with this nagging thought, so, indeed, for that night he decided not to seek sleep.

That evening much later he returned not to sleep but to discover. He did not unlock the door and prepared to undress. He knew that Joseph had returned and not retreated for the door was unlocked, and if it was Joseph, then Joseph had told him nothing. And if Joseph had told him nothing then Joseph preferred to tell him nothing for Joseph never concealed anything from him by pure whim. In all cases he could act as if, by mutual consent, he knew nothing—unless Joseph knew nothing either, but this did not occur to him.

So saying he climbed into his bunk. The fact that his bunk was occupied did not prevent him from falling to sleep at once, for he was very tired and a natural man. However on the morrow while shaving he noticed that Joseph's bunk was occupied, doubtless by the same person who had previously filled his bed, if it was not Joseph, himself. On the assumption that he knew nothing and did not want to know anything, this being his latest discovery, he decided that any further discovery could in no manner be enlightening. So before leaving the room and the occupant, he inspected closer, and found that she was not Joseph. He left the room leaving the door unlocked.

At the stroke of nine that evening he returned and without turning on the light undressed and, remembering everything, climbed into Joseph's bed.  
—This can not go on, said Joseph.

Read also Peter Handke's 'Abstraction of the Ball That Fell in the Ever.'

## Abstraction of the Ball That Fell in the River

As children we often sat at the edge of the river Sunday afternoons watching the soccer game from where we sat at the **midfield line**. Whenever the ball fell in the water near where we were sitting we ran alongside the river and with long poles fished the ball out of the water. We could take our time doing this since each time the ball fell in the water another ball that was kept in reserve was put into play from the **sideline**. We ran as fast as the ball was carried along by the river until we fished it out always just before it reached the wall of the weir. As a rule, the river flowed slowly enough so all we had to do was walk alongside the ball. But once when the river was swollen we had to run.

At the edge of a soccer field, which is situated by a river, a number of children are in the habit of having fun running alongside the ball whenever it falls into the river during the course of play; that is, they run alongside the ball from the **midfield line** to the end of the field and fish it out of the water only there. Once when the river was swollen the children had to run very quickly.

Children walk alongside the ball each time it falls in the river at **midfield**. They fish the ball out of the water only at the end of the field. When the river is swollen the children run very quickly.

Persons walk from the **midfield line** of a soccer field to the end of the field alongside an object that is drifting in the river at the edge of the field. At the moment when they reach the end of the field the referee whistles half-time. When the river is swollen and the persons have to run they come to a stop alongside the object at the end of the field shortly before the half-time whistle blows.

Someone is walking along the edge of a soccer field next to an object that has fallen in the river. He gets under way 30 seconds before the last minute of the first half of the game. At the very moment he has reached the end of the field and stands next to the object the referee blows the half-time whistle. When the river is swollen he reaches the end of the field together with the object precisely one second before the whistle blows and after he has gotten under way simultaneously with the object 10 seconds before the referee blows his whistle.

In order to traverse half the length of a playing field (playing field length = 90 meters) someone requires 1 minute, 30 seconds. When he has to run he requires for the same distance only 9 seconds.

It takes someone 90 seconds to traverse 45 meters. Running it takes him 9 seconds.

90 sec	45 m
1 sec	speed x m
9 sec	45 m
1 sec	speed y m

$$90x = 45$$

$$9y = 45$$

$$x = \frac{45}{90}$$

$$y = \frac{45}{9}$$

$$x = \frac{1}{2}$$

$$y = 5$$

As children we walked on Sunday afternoons at a speed of one half meter per second alongside the soccer ball when it was kicked from the playing field into the river. But when the **river** was swollen we had to run alongside the ball at a speed of five meters per second to fish the ball out of the water **before it** would **be** washed over the water of the weir.

**What** is the writer doing here? By showing you the different ways in which a subject or **event** can be approached by a writer, he is alerting you to the many different ways in which the same subject or event can be perceived by the reader, even if the writer **were** to present only one **of** these possibilities. So why present a **unidimensional** perspective in the first place? Not merely are attempts at analysis abandoned but, in the process, the very act of **analysis** is mocked by being carried to excess.

This may **seem** like a **didactic** way to approach anti-didactic fiction, but the writers' **main** point seems to be that **since everything** is a game anyway, why not play a **guessing** game between reader and writer to see where **it will** lead?

## 417 AGAINST LEGISLATION ON SCALE/SIZE

If some experimenting writers tend to develop analysis and interpretation to their tedious end, others **mock at** the concept of 'developing' a story. They write pieces that **are** so brief that the stories end before the reader has a chance to ponder where they might lead. The legendary short story we read about ghosts in our last Unit **was one such** example.

### Activity 2

Given below is a short story by Russell **Edson**. Read it and answer the questions given at the end.

**father  
father,  
what have  
you done?  
Russell Edson**

A **MAN** straddling the apex of his roof cries, **giddyup**. The house rears up on its back **porch** and all its bricks fall apart and the house crashes to the ground.

His wife cries from the rubble, father father, what have you done?

- a) Is it possible to expand this story — make it **longer** (30 words)
- b) **Is it** possible to develop the idea contained in **this** story? Why? (30 words)

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## 4.8 SUMMING UP

In **this** Unit, the fourth and final one of the Block 'Experimental Stories' you learnt about some of the innovations in style brought about by writers of experimental **fiction**. Some of the trends you were shown, through the use of examples from such fiction, included

- the trend against portrayal of events and characters, morals, styles of clothing, etc. as apparent in the world around;
- the trend against subjects and themes of sociological, psychological and contemporary relevance;
- the trend against giving meanings and analysing issues; and finally,
- an almost total rejection of writing to any scale or stipulated length.

It is also suggested that, as a sequel to this Unit, you continue to read fiction by John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Borges, Gunter Grass, Peter Handke and others mentioned in this Unit. You should also use the ideas presented here in your own creative writing—not all at once, but judiciously and selectively. You will see for yourself how the work gains in depth and meaning when you do so.

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## 4.9 ACTIVITIES: AIDS TO ANSWERS

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### Activity 1

If you found each of your attempts a futile exercise, the writer's purpose would have been served. You can, of course, act wise and call it a story about 'a crisis of identity'. But how much wiser does that leave you? What the writer is doing here is to consciously mock your attempts at interpretation, at understanding the complexity of the seemingly simple actions he so vividly describes.

### Activity 2

- a) Since the story itself is so brief, any attempt to expand the story will have to merely add description of character and event—but this is impossible merely on the basis of the information the writer himself gives.
- b) What is the idea contained in the story? The writer himself consciously evades giving any idea. So it would be impossible to develop it any further.

**\*Note:** The two 'activities' given in this Unit were meant to reinforce the ideas that experimental fiction, by its very nature, resists overt meaning, interpretation and analysis.

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## 4.10 GLOSSARY

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You will find in the glossary a short list of the terms used in this Unit.

**Epiphanic:** from 'epiphany' meaning an intuitive and sudden insight into the reality and basic meaning of an event.

**Metafiction** is a form of experimental writing being used by some contemporary writers. This kind of fiction represents a movement away from subject or theme. It is the kind of fiction that is not about any external world, but about a world contained within itself.