The ‘Little Epic’ Paradox: From the Ancient Epyllion to Alice Munro

by

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This thesis is an investigation of the evolution of the epyllion form, beginning in the ancient world and continuing to the contemporary period. Although it was previously supposed that the ancient form died soon after Ovid, the epyllion experienced a reawakening in the German Romantic Period. As a result, its core conventions became integrated into the popular German form known as the *Novelle*, which in turn has had profound influence on the contemporary short fiction of writers such as Alice Munro. This thesis will trace the trajectory of the epyllion’s evolution, using Alice Munro’s *Novelle* “Too Much Happiness” as a case study to demonstrate the way in which the contemporary *Novelle* represents the lattermost stage in the epyllion’s development.
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Introduction

When we think of the great epic writers from antiquity such as Homer and Virgil, often we associate them with popular lengthy heroic narratives such as *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Aeneid*. These typical examples of iconic epic poetry exceed 10,000 lines in length, the characteristic which we automatically identify as the definitive hallmark of the epic form. In the popular mind, there is an assumption that in order to accommodate the grandness and the scope of the ancient heroic sagas, the poet must necessarily adopt a flowing style and lengthier form as seen in *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Aeneid*. But while epic proper has been examined in great depth, its lesser-known relative, the epyllion, has received far less attention.

The epyllion, or ‘little epic,’ has received relatively little attention in academic studies owing to its seemingly paradoxical nature and the way in which it seems to resist definition. As a form that is relatively short, typically no more than 500 lines in length (Crump 23), the epyllion seems at first to defy epic tradition, and has largely gone unnoticed in the vast shadow of its acclaimed counterpart, the grand epic. Nevertheless, the epyllion is a significant form that has had profound impact on literary history across a multitude of cultures and traditions, in poetry and in prose, from its beginning in the ancient world extending into present day literature. What began as a relatively minor form characterized by artistic restraint and simplicity has been rediscovered and experimented with by numerous writers of various nationalities over many centuries. With each successive adaptation and treatment of the form, the epyllion has gradually evolved until it has been transformed into something unique. In this thesis, I will examine in detail the specific trajectory that the epyllion form followed during its evolution, beginning in the ancient world and continuing to the contemporary period.
In 1931, Marjorie Crump published *The Epyllion from Theocritus to Ovid*, which critics regard as the definitive guide to the epyllion form. Crump states that:

The epyllion seems to have died out with Ovid, while grand epic, which the Neoteroi had made unpopular, comes to its own again owing to the enormous popularity and influence of the *Aeneid*. The epic poets of the Silver Age followed the tradition of the Vergilian epic; the successors of the epyllion writers are the European poets, who drew their inspiration from Ovid. (Crump 48)

Her statement is important for two reasons: first, it suggests that the epyllion is unusual in its evolution, as it has undergone a number of cycles of popularity, having actually died and then been resurrected after a lengthy period of history. Secondly, it suggests that the writers responsible for reviving the form were from a variety of countries throughout Europe, including Germany and England, As will be demonstrated in Chapter 4, the writers of the Romantic Period in Germany played a pivotal role not only in reawakening the epyllion, but also in reconfiguring it into a form that could appeal to a more modern readership. The number and the importance of the various contributions made by German scholars to the overall field of Homeric poetry and its legacy are immense, and the role of the German Romantics in reviving the epyllion and its characteristics in contemporary fiction cannot be over-exaggerated.

The very fact that so many of the sources concerning Homeric and other ancient Greek and Latin poetry are written by Germanic authors suggests that writers and scholars from that country have possessed a particular interest in the subject for a considerable time. As Butler observes, “Germany is the supreme example of [Greece’s] triumphant spiritual tyranny,” not only in literary circles but also in art and in philosophy. In fact, “they [the Germans] have been obsessed by them [the Greeks] most utterly” (Butler 6). This overwhelming interest in antiquity

The scholars and writers of the German Romantic Period were, as Perkins identifies, pivotal in generating “an effectual demand for more profound speculation, and more serious emotion than was dealt in by writers of the former century”’ (Perkins 95). Writers turned to the narratives of the past and to the heroic age for inspiration – not only to the epic poetry of Homer and Virgil, but also to lesser known writers such as Theocritus and Callimachus, who experimented with new and more obscure forms, including the epyllion or ‘little epic’ (Crump 19). In fact, there are some accounts of an argument that occurred when Callimachus claimed that the time of the Hellenistic epic was at an end, and that the true desire of the public was for condensed poems with finer aesthetic details. Such records indicate that Theocritus supported Callimachus’s views, and thus chose to create alternate forms that would suit popular tastes; the idyll and the epyllion (Gow xxii). Thus, Callimachus and Theocritus are credited with the creation and the development of the Alexandrian epyllion (Crump 19). Theocritus is also regarded as the father of the idyllic epyllion – believed to be an earlier version of the form (Crump 37).

Although the German Romantics are credited with having resurrected the epyllion, scholars from other countries also played important roles in re-establishing connections between the literature of the past with that of the present day. Numerous theories about the connection
between ancient and modern literature have been proposed. Russian theorist Vladimir Propp ranks as one of the most significant. First published in 1928, Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* remains a highly acclaimed work that has influenced numerous scholars over a variety of fields of research and study.

Propp’s initial study, based on an assortment of 117 Russian folktales, demonstrated that each of these stories was based on identical structural frameworks of plot and characterization (Salomon 258). These similarities or ‘functions’, of which there are 31 (Propp 21), differ from the motifs that are dispersed throughout any given story, and occur in a pre-established, unchanging chronological order (Propp 21). Although all 31 functions do not occur within a single tale, those that do appear do so in the same order in every story. Propp’s initial claim was that this theory was only in regards to Russian folktales (Propp 19) but his paradigm has since been found applicable to a broad range of narratives, including Greek romances and even Biblical stories (Salomon 258). More pertinent to this study, Propp’s 31 stages of folk narrative have also been applied to classical heroic myths and epic poetry, including portions of Homer’s *Odyssey* (Salomon 258).

A primary concern of a study of this nature is the significance of a seemingly obscure form to contemporary literary studies. In truth, the epyllion was, in its ancient conception, relatively simple in its structure and direct in its style. Our knowledge of the ancient epyllion is limited, yet it still has the potential to render invaluable insight into current literary forms. Specifically, the act of reconceiving our perceptions of the modern story form by viewing it in the context of the epyllion is a worthwhile exercise that might alter or even challenge our existing conceptions of contemporary short fiction. Modern-day scholars, including the esteemed Canadian critic Marshall McLuhan, have identified the epyllion as a topic of interest and have
reintroduced the subject into contemporary academic conversation which strongly advocates the careful re-examination of the epyllion as a significant form. However, the epyllion did not simply re-enter scholarly conversation in Romantic Period Germany as a casual topic of interest, but actually experienced a ‘reawakening’, as its core elements of style and structure became the foundation for the German *Novelle*. The introduction of the *Novelle* form has had resounding impact on the practices of writers worldwide, since it gave rise to a number of highly influential works including Thomas Mann’s *Der Tod in Venedig* (*Death in Venice*) (1912). This work and countless others like it, produced as a result of the German Romantic Period, set the standard of *Novellen* in Germany, and then later in the rest of Europe and finally in America. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, the *Novelle* tradition, though relatively young, has had profound impact on Western literature, influencing writers such as Alice Munro to the present day. The advent of the *Novelle* was a pivotal moment in literary history, since it led to the creation of the forms we now recognize as short stories, novellas, and novellettes.

In order to fully illustrate the significant impact that epyllion and epic poetry have had on contemporary literature, it is necessary to acknowledge the importance of such works in antiquity. In his work *The Rise of the Greek Epic*, Murray places particular emphasis on the role of the poet in ancient Greek society. The Homeric bard, Murray explains, held as important a position in society as heroes – they provided a public service and forged a connection between the common populace and the elite citizenry (Murray 6). Furthermore, bards were believed to possess a strong and important relationship with the divine (Murray 7). The role of poetry, therefore, was invaluable as entertainment and as tradition. With the introduction of an alphabetic writing system in the 8th century BCE, poets became able to record their work and to
more easily distribute it. The association of little epics with the revered Homeric epics may have assisted in assuring the former’s preservation (Hainsworth 8).

The number of epyllia that were actually composed is unknown; moreover, several extant examples are only fragmentary, a fact that restricts our ability to examine the form in-depth across a satisfactory spectrum of examples. Yet the samples which have survived have played a significant role in influencing the literature of numerous writers from around the world. Despite being a globally embraced form, the epyllion, like the epic, has retained its primary function: to entertain, and to demonstrate artistic ability, and not to chronicle historical events. The epyllion and epic, therefore, are engineered in much the same way as the fiction of today – to provoke a specific effect in the listener or reader. The stories that are relayed within the great sagas such as The Iliad and The Odyssey provide later writers with a core source of inspiration in matters of subject, style, and structure. As Hainsworth observes: “All the circumstances that led to the idea of a past Heroic Age were thus present: disaster certainly, probably conquest, and migration from the former homeland. The idea did not fail to develop, and it became one of the most important legacies inherited by the epic tradition from its progenitors” (Hainsworth 14). As a result, Hainsworth contends, numerous generations of Classical poets drew their inspiration from the Hellenes of the second millennium B.C., and their contemporary successors have struggled to find a worthy substitute (Hainsworth 14).

This phenomenon of today’s writers repeatedly returning to the same ancient well of inspiration, despite the increasingly vast amount of time and space that divides them, is one which is not easily explained. The most likely possibility may be that these stories represent humanity on a basic level which is applicable to situations regardless of time or location. They represent the polar extents of human existence and experience, and acknowledge and explore
both the ideal human model and also the basest depths of human nature, frequently within a single narrative.

The popularity of the grand epic poem has diminished somewhat in modern literature; the more recent increased taste for shorter fiction (Blaise 191) demands the pointed, highly focussed attention to the individual circumstances of one or a few characters. It may be for this reason that the epyllion, and to a lesser extent its grand epic counterpart, has persisted into the literary conventions of the present day. The epyllion is a form that borrows certain aspects of epic poetry, and applies them to single incidents and characters in such a way that makes the ordinary appear in some way extraordinary, or at least worthy of description. This practice of compressing epic themes into deceptively short narratives, and the subsequent saturation that this creates, has captured the attention of both writers and readers.

In order to demonstrate fully the trajectory that the epyllion has followed from its initial creation to its reawakening in the German Romantic Period and finally to the short literature of today, these events will be discussed in chronological order. First, I will examine a cross-section of extant examples of ancient epyllia, then in the next chapters I will discuss the epyllion form in relation to grand epic and the Romantic Period, and finally I will analyze the rebirth of the form in contemporary short fiction, as exemplified by the work of Alice Munro, specifically her title story of her collection Too Much Happiness (2009).
Chapter 1:
From the Ancient Epyllion to Alice Munro

The forms that are commonly referred to today in English-language literary studies as ‘short story’ and ‘tale’ were highly favoured during the Romantic Period. Some of the greatest examples of the form were created by German writers of that period, including Goethe, Hoffman, and Schlegel (May, The Short Story, 108), who experimented extensively with conventions of style and structure. Interestingly, classificatory terms such as ‘short story’ and ‘novelette’ had no equivalents in German literature; works of shorter fiction produced during this period were simply referred to as ‘Erzählungen’ (simply meaning ‘narratives’) or, more commonly, as ‘Novellen’, related to our Anglicised word ‘novella’. Although the differences between these two terms were, and remain, under debate, this slightly less complicated classification system (relative to the more modern English literary convention of assigning such literary works labels of ‘short story’, ‘novella’, ‘novelette’, etc.) is in many ways more appropriate, since it helps to alleviate some of the constriction that imposing an over-complicated, artificial framework can cause.

Over time, the English-language literary conventions have become increasingly specific, differentiating, as mentioned previously, between not only ‘short story’ and ‘novel’, but also introducing additional categories such as ‘novella’ and ‘novelette’. This methodology is predominantly based on a story’s length, and less on more integral features such as structure, density, or style. Although length is certainly a consideration that must be taken into account when classifying fiction, it is by no means decisive since classification is dependent on a combination of factors. Thus, for the purposes of this study I will invoke the German term
‘Novelle’ (plural ‘Novellen’) as the collective term to include the forms we currently recognize as short stories, novellas, and novelettes. In this way, simpler prose works, such as the ‘short short’, the anecdote, and the ‘tale’, can be categorized as ‘short fiction’, while more substantial works, including the novel and the epic, will be termed ‘long fiction’. The Novelle, therefore, represents a ‘middle form’, a phrase which might be useful in alleviating some of the constriction caused by imposing an artificial framework of many subcategories.

The present system of categorizing English literature based on word count or number of pages presents a number of difficulties, most of which stem from using length as the main criterion. Traditionally, popular categorization methods state that a short story may not exceed 7,500 words, a novelette is between 7,500 and 17,500 words, and a novella from 17,500 to 40,000 words, while anything exceeding that upper limit is considered a novel (Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America 2008). This classification system at first seems a convenient method of establishing which stories should be considered comparable for literary analysis, but it can actually hinder progress in literary analysis and criticism.

The system of categorizing literature based on such an arbitrary criterion as length frequently encourages us to automatically dismiss the possibilities of comparing works that, despite belonging to different categories, might yield genuinely valuable insight upon closer examination in the context of one another. The task of juxtaposing two or more works is the responsibility of the reader, critic, essayist, or writer and therefore the decision of what literature may be appropriate for comparison should be left to their discretion. Although it may be impossible at this time to fully reject the convention of classifying literature based on length, it is highly probable that removing at least some of the superfluous ‘barriers’ or minor categories may prove useful. The original German concept described by the term ‘Novellen’ is more practical
and efficient, since it openly acknowledges the limits we face in trying to establish some connection between length and any of the specific sets of criteria, conventions, or traits that we try to associate exclusively with one literary form or another.

The practice of dividing fiction into so many categories, with so little perceptible difference between each, is problematic for a number of reasons, the most obvious of which is reduced efficiency. First and foremost, this convention vastly increases the amount of duplicate information and overlap of academic study. This overlap of information and investigation is clearly perceptible, as demonstrated by the significant number of books dedicated to outlining the standard framework of the ‘short story’ – while fewer writers have managed to produce substantial or comprehensive books concerning the ‘novella’ or ‘Novelle’. One likely explanation for this is simply that many, if not all, points that can be made about the short story are equally applicable to the novella or novelette.

As already discussed, the idea of rigidly dividing literary prose fiction into ‘tale’, ‘short story’, ‘novella’, ‘novelette,’ and ‘novel’ carries certain problems. Given that the core differences in form tend to rest more in concerns such as structure, style, pacing, character or plot development, and situation, it might be more appropriate to condense these traditional categories to make the differentiations of ‘short fiction,’ ‘Novellen,’ and ‘long fiction’. Using this model as a simpler, more condensed alternative for the existing one may not be as convenient, but it is infinitely more flexible. The traditional English-language system imposes so many boundaries between categories that it actually restricts the perception of dynamic analytical or creative interchange between them. Rather than supporting critical analysis, traditional methodology is actually harming it since numerous avenues of investigation between literature of different categories are ultimately discouraged. We may instead begin to consider the divisions
between fictions less in terms of mere length and more in relation to their perceived ‘amplitude’. In considering ‘amplitude’, we begin to acknowledge that the scope of perception contained within a work of fiction is not simply a function of length. For example, by using the term ‘amplitude’, we may recognize the very real capacity for the shorter work to evoke, in some cases, quite strong elements of the epic, which might actually overshadow the relative epic quality of a less condensed novel. Furthermore, as Baldeshwiler notes, we may begin to consider the possibility of viewing narratives as being either “lyrical” or “epical” based on the manner in which each presents its subjects and also on how plot progresses (Baldeshwiler in May 231).

The Novelle represents a kind of ‘middle form’, just as its ancient counterpart, epyllion, bridges the gap between epic and idyll. The Novelle continuously resists classification into subcategories such as novella and novelette, and its relationship to the novel has generated tremendous controversy for as long as the two have co-existed. Similarly, the epyllion form simultaneously resists and demands separation from epic and lyric. The development of one form can be, and frequently is, extremely convoluted and complex. It is this paradox that has effectively prevented any satisfactory conclusive answer regarding several branches of literary genealogy from being reached. Added to this are various other barriers including those of language and culture, which frequently impair the accurate transmission of literature, as well as the intermittent ‘dark patches’ in history from which there is little extant evidence to indicate the development of a pattern or system.

Regardless of its heritage or concerns of definition, the force and speed with which the Novelle has grown in popularity over the last few decades is remarkable. Its concentration and narrow focus seem to appeal strongly to modern tastes. Unlike novelists, who describe the gradual evolution of characters and events, writers of Novellen typically follow the example set
by the epyllion; they portray a single incident, and tend to focus on the climatic shift in a character’s reality or identity.

In the case of Alice’s Munro’s “Too Much Happiness,” the climatic point may be difficult to identify, since there are a few points in the story that appear to carry significant weight. In order to build a tightly compact, uncluttered narrative, Munro regulates the momentum of the plot, accelerating over less important details, but lingering over more significant ones. This method is used by all writers of Novellen and of novels, of course, since it is impossible to relay every detail with equal attention, not only for the sake of maintaining the reader’s attention, but also because this approach is necessary to prevent a narrative from running too long. Munro, however, exerts particularly strong control over narrative pacing as a means of signalling or inciting realization or catharsis.

Munro makes frequent and effective use of anadiplosis, a rhetorical technique that involves back-to-back repetition of words or phrases to augment “the shock” experienced by the reader (Duncan 68). Munro uses this method throughout “Too Much Happiness.” For example, when Sophia makes final visit to her tutor Weierstrass, she tells him about her foray into fiction-writing, to which he responds:

“I am not generally fond of novels.”

“They are for women?”

“Truly, I sometimes forget that you are a woman. I think of you as – as a –”

“As a what?”

“As a gift to me and me alone.” (“Too Much Happiness” 280)
Anadiplosis is a rhetorical device, but it is also an effective technique used to slow the pace of the narrative so that the reader has time to fully absorb the incident being described. The reduction in momentum signals the presence of significant or important material. In this case, it draws the reader’s attention to the final moments Sophia spends in Weirstrass’s presence:

Sophia bent and kissed his white forehead. She held back her tears until she had said goodbye to his sisters and left the house.

I will never see him again, she thought (Munro “Too Much Happiness” 280).

This moment marks a key point in the narrative that has numerous implications to the way in which we interpret the events that follow. Despite its restricted length, this story achieves great scope and powerful sensation on the part of the reader. The effectiveness of the passage, and the story as a whole, relies almost entirely on saturation and artistic restraint – the same factors that define the Novelle as a separate form from the novel. I will return to this moment and the implications it has on the greater narrative in Chapter 5.

Essentially, the way in which novelists and writers of Novellen craft narrative are quite similar; it is the measure and degree with which they apply various techniques that separates them. Novelists possess the luxury of being able to add details that are purely artistic; writers of Novellen rely on every detail to carry substantial weight and often to perform multiple tasks simultaneously. For example, the word chosen to describe a character or situation might have to function not just descriptively, but also on a metaphorical, metaphysical, allegorical, or ironic level as well. A single detail might have to assist both plot progression and character development. In their book From Cliché to Archetype, Marshall McLuhan and Wilfred Watson confirm that “the little epic, like the cyclic epic before it, incorporated massive erudition. In our
time it does this by esoteric allusions and compression, retrieving folk clichés obscurely and ironically” (McLuhan and Watson 78). This layering or multiplicity of meaning is what allows a relatively brief work to carry the force of a novel or an epic, and frequently such grandeur is borrowed from the age of heroes described by the poets of ancient Greece and Rome. As successors of the Weimar Classicists in Germany, writers of the Romantic Period dealt heavily with themes, styles, structures, and forms that originated in antiquity (Perkins 102).

The canon of Novellen produced by the German Romantics and their successors is extensive, as is the degree to which prominent contributors, such as Goethe and Kleist, managed to break with convention. Despite such diversity, however, all of these stories are comprised of similar fundamental components. Each of these structural components were, and continue to be, regarded by German literary minds as the building blocks from which all stories are constructed. As Henry H.H. Remak has explained, the most common of these include: Unerhörte (the unheard of), Wendepunkt (turning point), Sachlichkeit (brevity, directness, economy of expression), Erzählung (story or narrative), Episch (factor of the epic), Drama (drama), Zufall (destiny), and Ironie (irony) (Remak 2-3). These basic constituents may be equally applicable to the study of the epyllion – and, as we shall also see, to the study of the modern and contemporary Novelle.

The first of this list, Unerhörte, has the greatest interest for the study of the epyllion. The term Unerhörte refers not only to a story that is not well-known, but also to one which is ‘worth telling’ (Remak 2-3). It describes the very reason why we read in the first place, and allows even the most ordinary characters or circumstances to become somehow extraordinary. The primary aim of the epyllion was originally to address the failings or blind-spots perceived in the epic. These little epics, as Crump states in her seminal 1931 study of the form, typically favoured the
point of view of those individuals who were involved, minimally or else indirectly, in the adventures of heroes, such as Achilles or Odysseus, but who never attained greatness or recognition themselves (Crump 22). This seeking out of the obscure, and on telling the unheard tales of such characters, became the epyllion’s ultimate focus.

In “Before the Epyllion: Concepts and Texts,” Masciadri specifically identifies the German Romantic Period as the historical moment when the epyllion was reintroduced into the literary sphere of conscience, and its conventions were being deliberately utilized in popular poetry:

It is striking that in the same period, a new kind of short epic in hexameters developed in German-language literature which showed a close relation to the tradition of idyll poetry, but which forewent the establishment of a specific generic term for these texts. Both tendencies moved surprisingly parallel to the movement which had already given rise to the Greek epyllion. (Masciadri in Baumbach and Bar 24).

The fact that the resurrection and, in some cases, redefinition of the epyllion form and the rise of the Novelle occurred more or less simultaneously is no coincidence. In fact, they could be seen as mirroring facets of the same thought. These two similar forms undoubtedly borrowed from one another, and it is their combined legacy that has reached us in the present day, disguised under the names of ‘short story’, ‘novella’, or ‘novelette’.

MARSHALL McLUHAN: A CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE ON ANTIQUITY:

Although in contemporary times the term epyllion has all but faded from popular use, recent interest in the form has arisen, most notably in the writing of Marshall McLuhan. His
contribution to our understanding of the epyllion and its place in literary history is profound, and has been linked to both media and technological studies. The vast majority of McLuhan’s notes on the subject are fragmentary, and are not consolidated (Chrystall 2011). Yet despite this difficulty, at least one essay does exist which summarizes the more significant points McLuhan makes regarding the epyllion and its place in contemporary media.

Chrystall’s essay “A Little Epic: McLuhan’s Use of Epyllion” (2011) addresses the highlights of McLuhan’s inquiry into epyllia. His exploration of the genesis and development of the epyllion form includes potential reasons for its use in antiquity and throughout the Medieval and Elizabethan periods, followed by its reappearance in the modern day. This study of evolution clearly demonstrates that the term epyllion, in its modern conception, differs greatly from the ancient idea; in fact, our current definition of epyllia is considerably more restricted than the original one. The set of defining characteristics that scholars associate with epyllia has been applied to these poems retrospectively, which means that it is only recently that writers have been able to compose epyllia by deliberately adhering to a specific set of conditions which the form is meant to fulfill. The set of components associated with ancient epyllia will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, but first it is important to address McLuhan’s investigations into the form, since they represent some of the most far-reaching insights on the subject.

McLuhan concluded that epyllia are frequently aetiological and speculative in nature, which, in some ways, might be their greatest source of power since they simultaneously reflect and create space or reality. This capacity to both invoke the past and shape perspectives on the present is vital, as it allows a relatively short poem to gain the amplitude of an epic. In fact,
McLuhan makes the case that what was once called ‘epyllion’ eventually became almost synonymous with the decidedly more far-reaching genre of myth (Chrystall 2011):

The *epyllion* was also aligned with the Dionysic because the essence of the form, if not its *raison d’être*, is the manipulation of time in a bid to evoke the “eternal moment.” The action emerging from the interface of the plot, as the carrier or container, and the subplot, the older form in the role of context, spiritualized the whole in such a way that the reader experiences timelessness. The *double-ness* of the form is a principal means of snatching actions from time into eternity with its accompanying recurrent imagery.” ([McLuhan], Chrystall 2011)

While the ancient conception of the form is believed to have faded almost to the point of complete eradication shortly after Ovid, some examples predating the Renaissance Period may be identified. Of these, perhaps the most surprising occurrences (given the epyllion’s pagan associations) are found within Christian literature. Christianity, McLuhan asserts, actually favoured the epyllion because it allowed writers to interact with pagan mythology without compromising their own beliefs or religious dogma (Chrystall 2011).

The Bible contains examples of “little epics,” including the opening to the Gospel of St. John. What is especially pertinent to this study is the fact that a number of the books of the Old Testament, including Ruth, Judith, and Tobit, are classified as being ‘short stories’ or, more specifically, “ancient Jewish short stories” (Tilford 1). The coexistence of both epyllia and *Novellen* within a single book, especially one which carries with it immense weight in both the literary and theological spheres, suggests that the two forms have, to some degree, frequently existed in tandem.
Further connections can be made in relation to the Bible and the way in which it demonstrates parallels between multiple forms. Not only are *Novellen* and epyllia coexistent within its pages, but points about the relationship between epyllia and epic, its greater relative, can also be made. As mentioned previously, a portion of St. John’s Gospel is considered to be an example of epyllion. That very segment was actually reconceived in the early Byzantine period by the Greek poet Nonnus, who used the original text to compose an epic poem of his own (Hollis 149-50).

Nonnus’s adaptation effectively demonstrates the interplay between the epyllion and epic forms: the capacity of the epyllion to suggest epic proportion, just as briefer fiction is capable of imitating the expansiveness of the novel. In general, the concept of the epyllion form did not appear again until the Medieval and Renaissance Periods (Crump 48), when the basic conventions inherent in the epyllion form were being used by writers of those times. Since these poems diverged from the old form both in metre and in length, they are now frequently discounted as being true epyllia. Although some of the techniques of ancient epyllia were used, the classical term epyllion was not applied to such poems, and the name did not reappear until the Romantic Period. The most notable extant examples of these epyllia-like poems are contained within the works of Dante and Chaucer (Chrystall 2011).

McLuhan’s work identifies a number of more contemporary examples of epyllia, including, as Chrystall states, works by Joyce, Pound, and Eliot. Of these, he identifies Joyce as a true master of both epyllion and epic. Joyce’s craft, like that of so many practitioners of *Novellen*, including Chekhov, was based on the creation of “metaphoric meaning through aesthetic patterning” (May, *The Short Story*, 57). Through the use of carefully engineered structures and uncluttered narratives, both Joyce and Chekhov were able to subtly enrich their
stories with multiple layers of meaning. This invariably allowed their narratives to retain their scope and power without having to sacrifice concision or increase length, and it is this compression and economy of expression that has become the ultimate goal of contemporary writers of Novellen.

Other renowned writers experimented with features of the epyllion; Edgar Allan Poe made effective use of the digression in his stories, which is considered by many to be a defining element of the epyllion form, as a means to create the perception of ‘timelessness’ or ‘multiplicity’. This same method of “magical parallelism” had already been employed by Dante and Shakespeare, and then by Joyce in Ulysses to traverse the gap between antiquity and modernity by joining myth and realism (Chrystall 2011).

In his book of literary essays The Interior Landscape, McLuhan reiterates the important role that antiquity played in inspiring and shaping the literature of the English Romantic Period. Although not an epyllion, Keats’s “Ode to A Grecian Urn” provides an example of the way in which poets of the Romantic Period focussed their attention on reproducing and reviving the themes of the ancient Greeks and Romans. “Ode to a Grecian Urn” is a short poem that McLuhan proposed may be viewed in three parts: the first dealing with pastoral, the second with pagan culture, and the third with pure nostalgia for the distant past (McLuhan 111-12). Much like the epic and epyllion poets of antiquity, Keats utilizes an ecphratic template to draw the reader’s attention to key ideas by focussing on a single piece of art, in this case, an urn. McLuhan states that Keats’s poem, though seemingly quite simple, actually rejects at the end the nostalgic effect that is so carefully created in the proceeding lines. Keats, McLuhan suggests, is outwardly questioning the mode of “escape” that nostalgia represents (McLuhan 112). In this way, Keats is suggesting that the well of inspiration tapped by most poets has been set too firmly
in antiquity and the Heroic Age, and must necessarily be re-contextualized within the present day.

McLuhan’s concept of the epyllion was as a way of simultaneously engaging with and escaping history, which was achieved mainly through the consideration and careful use of the dramatic (Chrystall 2011). Whereas long fiction writers achieve representation through 1:1 modelling of reality, practitioners of the Novelle use poetic suggestion and dramatic impression to augment our perspectives on a fragment of reality. In some instances, the author might choose to use a ‘novel-in-stories’ format, by deliberately composing multiple stories that can be combined to form a single cohesive unit. If one of these stories is read in isolation from the rest of the collection, depending on the way the writer has chosen to engineer them, it may appear as a fragment of a larger whole, or it might read as an independent unit.

CONTEMPORARY FICTION:

The chronology of the development of contemporary Novellen remains a highly debated topic. Some scholars of the short story such as Charles E. May assert that Edgar Allan Poe was responsible for perfecting the form, while others such as Mary Rohrberger remain adamant that Nathaniel Hawthorne should be considered the true ‘father’ of such literature. And, as May argues, each of these writers was undoubtedly indebted to the advances made by German writers of the Romantic Period including Goethe and Tieck (May xvi). Specifically, Poe’s power to produce a unified effect was, according to May, heavily inspired by the German Romantics (May xvi). Internationally, however, a number of other countries all lay claim to having produced the first true contemporary short story or Novelle; Guy de Maupassant, Nikolai Gogol, and Anton
Chekhov are all readily put forth for candidacy (Rohrberger in Winther et al. 4). Indeed, claims have been made that the short story or *Novelle* has in fact been in existence for far longer than previously acknowledged. Albright points out that the short story predate the novel, and for this reason should not be dismissed as a mere derivative of that form (Albright 4).

Earlier in this chapter, I referred to both the epyllion and the *Novelle* as ‘middle forms’; this intermediary nature in itself suggests a number of possibilities of genre, style, and language. While most would consider the epyllion to be an essentially poetic form, and *Novellen* essentially prosaic, the intermediate character of these two forms in fact allows the boundary between the two to become obscured. In a review of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*, Edgar Allan Poe notes that “Epics were the offspring of an imperfect sense of Art, and their reign is no more” On the other hand, Poe continues, “A poem too brief may produce a vivid, but never an intense or enduring impression” (Poe in May, *The New Short Story Theories* 60-1). Similarly, the epyllion can be seen as representing a middle-ground between the brief poem and the longer epic: one which strikes an effective balance between the satisfaction of the lengthy composition and the power of affect achieved by the short. As Poe points out, “Extreme brevity will degenerate into epigrammatism; but the sin of extreme length is even more unpardonable” (Poe in May, *The New Short Story Theories* 61). This particular balance of elements, of force and subtlety, power and pacing, which is shared by both the epyllion and the *Novelle*, may also result in a distinct style. The freedom of prose, in combination with the constrictions of length, frequently engages the reader using a kind of ‘poetic prose’. It is this use of ‘weighted’ language that allows the compressed to become expansive.
Chapter 2:
Reading Ancient Epyllia

The epyllion form is one which has confounded scholars for almost as long as it has been in existence. The epyllion has undergone a number of phases in its evolution, beginning with its inception in the ancient world, followed by its not altogether successful emulation in Renaissance literature, and then its ‘rebirth’ in the German Romantic Period and subsequently its continuation in modern and contemporary writing by figures such as Thomas Mann, James Joyce, and Alice Munro. A brief examination of a few examples produced by poets of the Hellenistic and Roman Periods will provide a cross-section of the form’s general character in the earlier chronological stages of its development.

Before examining examples of epyllia, it is important to first outline the characteristics of the form. In her decisive study *The Epyllion from Ovid to Theocritus*, Crump identifies a few core elements that are frequently associated with the epyllion. First, it should not exceed 500 lines in length. Second, the epyllion usually focuses on the heroine rather than the hero, and thus writers of the form often favoured stories with romantic subject matter. Epyllia generally only detail a single incident, involve at least one lengthy speech, and contain a digression (Crump 22-23).

1. “Hylas” or “Idyll 13”

Theocritus

3rd Century BCE

Syracuse
Theocritus (3rd Century BCE) was a bucolic poet from Syracuse who is frequently hailed as the father of pastoral poetry. The majority of his surviving poems are idylls, of which there are as many as thirty. Several of Theocritus’s idylls have been identified as epyllia, but his “Hylas,” Idyll 13, provides invaluable insight into his treatment of the form. It is a focussed description of the episode in Apollonius of Rhodes’s epic, The Argonautica, which details the quest to retrieve the Golden Fleece. In the epyllion, the narrator meditates on the love shared between Heracles and Hylas. Theocritus begins with a description of the nature of their love, and then continues with the events leading up to the tragic loss of the boy after he leaves the rest of the ship's company to draw water from the river. While Hylas is kneeling at the water’s edge, the Nymphs, like Heracles, become instantly infatuated with his youth and good looks and draw him away from the shore. Heracles desperately searches the river bank for the boy, but after an extended amount of time the rest of the Argonauts abandon the pair on the island.

Theocritus’s epyllion is relatively simple in structure and composition. Following a linear plotline, the poem begins with the development of the relationship between Heracles and Hylas, then proceeds to the events that led to the main incident when Hylas is lost to the Nymphs. Despite its frequent inclusion within Theocritus’s idylls, “Hylas” bears a number of traits that are frequently associated with the epyllion form. The poem itself is only seventy-five lines in length, falling well within Crump’s maximum limit of 500 lines (Crump 22). Although the subject of the poem is technically heroic and therefore epic in nature, as it follows the journey of the Argonauts and of Heracles, the story is unequivocally centred round the non-heroic character of the boy, Hylas, whose role in The Argonautica is relatively minor. From the outset, the narrator emphasizes that humans are not the only ones susceptible to falling in love; the gods are
portrayed as being equally affected, and responding in a similar manner. By this shift, Theocritus has moved away from epic and heroic tradition, and has instead redirected our attention to the everyday lives of humanity. Indeed, Theocritus imitates and rejects epic tradition simultaneously. He achieves this first by invoking one of the most well-known epics of the Greek canon, *The Argonautica*, not only through addressing the tale of the Golden Fleece, but also through other techniques. For example, Theocritus uses the epic simile to compare Heracles to a lion (Acosta-Hughes in Baumbach & Brill 253-4); a comparison which is seen repeatedly in *The Odyssey* of Homer. Theocritus, however, succeeds in inverting traditional epic convention. As Acosta-Hughes notes, this involves “the heroic reaction for an unheroic cause” (Acosta-Hughes in Baumbach & Brill 253); namely, Heracles’s attempts to recover Hylas, which are heroic, but are marred by his descent into pederasty (Mastronarde 274-5). In his essay “Theocritus’ Idyll 13: Love and the Hero” (1968) Mastronarde identifies a key factor in the “Hylas” which is instrumental in resisting the conventions of epic proper. Theocritus, Mastronarde claims, is deliberately placing heroic characters in a pastoral setting that is completely foreign to the epic world. These characters’ actions and motives therefore, are also out of place, and frequently result in these characters’ failure to thrive in their new environment. Non-heroic characters, on the other hand, such as Hylas and the Nymphs, whose personalities are distinctly pastoral, are seen to attain happiness and success without problem (Mastronade 275-6). In this way, the lives of common people become elevated, and the lives of heroes become disorganized and considerably less idealized. Thus, the greatness of gods and heroes is combined with the imperfections of humanity, and the boundaries between mortals and immortals becomes blurred. This inversion of epic convention and questioning of epic tradition is frequently the goal of the epyllion form.
All of the factors present in “Hylas” represent the classic recognizable conventions of the epyllion that Theocritus established; however, some variances from the form’s typical composition exist. Contrary to later conventions of the epyllion form, there is no speech or direct dialogue, nor is there an obvious digression. The poem is unusual since it is presented as a story being told by the narrator to a specific person, Nicias, whose name is present here, as well as in a number of other poems that Theocritus wrote. In fact, a number of the idylls of Theocritus are poetic-letters, many of a deeply personal nature, and several of which are addressed to Nicias.

Although relatively little is known about him, it is agreed that Nicias was himself a poet, as well as a physician, and is believed to have been a close friend of Theocritus, whom he may have met on the Island of Cos (Easterling & Knox 33). A small fragment from a response to a letter from Theocritus by Nicias has been discovered: “So it was true, Theocritus: the gods of Love/ made poets out of many otherwise uninspired” (Easterling & Knox 32). Unfortunately, owing to the few examples of poetry that have been preserved, we cannot know to what extent these two friends communicated in this way. Nevertheless, the fact remains that “Hylas,” like several of the other Idylls, is written with a specific reader in mind, whether Nicias or someone else (Theocritus addressed some of his other poems to a number of other recipients, including Nicias’s wife). It is this interface that creates an additional level of narrative in “Hylas,” one that is subtly integrated into the poem, but is nevertheless visible to us as modern readers. When this epyllion is read in the greater context of Theocritus’s collected idylls, an ongoing interplay between the two poets begins to emerge, and this epistolic style naturally evokes first person narration.

Theocritus’s “The Cyclops,” Idyll 6, is not an epyllion, but it provides an even clearer idea of the relationship between Theocritus and Nicias that is hinted at in Idyll 13. In this poem,
Theocritus begins by making a personal address to Nicias, advising him that the only cures for love sickness are poetry and music. In the longest section of the poem, he then recounts the song that the Cyclops sang to the Sea Nymph, who was the object of his affection, and this section accounts for the majority of the poem’s length. In the final line of the poem, however, Theocritus reverts his focus back to consoling Nicias, stating “Thus did Polyphemus tend his love-sickness with music, and got more comfort/thereout than he could have had for any gold” (Theocritus 6.80-81). The strongly personal, epistolic nature of this poem contributes not only depth but also a unified cyclical structure to the poem, since Theocritus both begins and ends with flourishes intended to console and to instruct Nicias on the subject of love.

Similarly, Theocritus achieves unity of thought in the “Hylas,” but, paradoxically, through contrast. The opening of the poem describes the affection of Heracles for Hylas and the way in which he, himself a hero, never left the boy’s side as he attempted to educate him in the hope that he could grow to be of a similar mind. The close of the poem mirrors this sentiment, but in reverse. Whereas in the opening lines, the godly and virtuous Heracles is praised by the narrator for his care of the boy, by the closing lines Heracles is cast in a far less positive light – when the crew label him as a “deserter,” while the innocuous character of his young non-heroic charge “fairest Hylas” is “to be numbered of the Blest” (Theocritus 13.73). This is complicated by the fact that Heracles’s reason for not returning to the Argo was not mutinous betrayal, but his determination to rescue Hylas.

2. “Europa”

Moschus

2nd Century BCE
Moschus (2nd century BCE) was a poet originally from Syracuse who is known to have been aware of the works of Theocritus. Of his few poems that have survived, his “Europa” is typically classified as an example of Hellenistic epyllion. The poem begins with Europa’s dream of two maidens, each of whom represents a foreign continent that is contending for her hand in marriage. In the following main narrative, Zeus appears to Europa and her companions in the form of a bull, and carries her away on his back from Tyre to Crete, where he sires several children with her.

Unlike Theocritus’s “Hylas,” Moschus’s poem incorporates several passages of direct discourse between characters. Moschus’s narrative focusses on a very short period of time, which allows descriptions of both the geography and of the characters’ interactions to be relatively detailed. Despite its restricted length, Moschus’ epyllion names a vast number of geographic regions and deities, which allows it, though somewhat artificially, to broaden its scope. In this way, what would otherwise have been the description of an isolated incident is expanded upon by evoking images of far-off regions and eminent immortal figures, in much the same way that a full-length epic poem would do.

Like Theocritus before him, Moschus employs a relatively simple narrative structure. However, Moschus’s poem makes some noticeable advances from Theocritus’s, since he expands the poem’s scope through *ecphrasis*, whereby the poet focusses on a work of art to initiate meditations on a subject or event. Using this technique, the narrator describes Europa’s basket, which is inlaid with three images cast in metal: (i) Io’s journey to Egypt in the form of a heifer; (ii) her transformation back to a woman after being touched by Zeus; and (iii) the birth of
the peacock from the blood of Argus. This passage forms a quasi-digression, though it is relatively minor in relation to the rest of the narrative. Yet the presence of *ecphrasis* within the poem is significant for a less obvious reason that is concerned less with structure and more with theme. While *ecphrasis* is a relatively common technique used by epic poets to initiate action within a narrative, it also, when used in epyllion, shifts the focus of a poem. A main goal of epyllion poets is to use epic techniques in new ways so that their original effect or intention will be somehow inverted. *Ecphrasis*, Kurman argues, is actually used by some epyllion poets as a way of questioning the ideas of humanity’s relationship with the immortals. By placing the artist, the painter, the sculptor, etc., and not the gods, in the role of the creator, the poem centres its attention on humanity. Humans, therefore, are represented as the primary powerful entities within the world rather than the divinities. In doing so, the poet intimates that humans are in far greater control of their lives and fates than earlier epic poems had ever cared to admit (Kurman 3-4).

3. “The Wedding of Peleus and Thetis” or “Catullus 64”

Catullus

84-54 BCE

Greece

408 lines

Catullus Gaius Valerius (84-54 BCE) was a Roman writer particularly known for his lyric poetry. Catullus’s epyllion, “Catullus 64,” is, like most epyllia, composed in dactylic hexameter, similar to its grand epic relative. “Catullus 64” serves as one of the few extant
examples of the epyllion form, making it an invaluable source of information and insight into the styles and themes in use during the period from which it comes.

In contrast to the two previous epyllia, “Catullus 64” has a lengthy, easily discernible digression: a characteristic that later became a hallmark of the form. The beginning of the poem’s digression is triggered using *ecphrasis* (Kurman 9). In the case of “Catullus 64,” this technique effectively initiates the close appraisal of a cloth that lies draped over Thetis’s marriage bed that is embroidered with images representing the story of Ariadne and Theseus, whose tale becomes the subject of the digression. It has been noted that Catullus has chosen to begin his “64” narrative where Apollonius ended *The Argonautica* (Warden 402). Similar to most epyllion writers, Catullus has turned to a popular narrative from epic tradition for his inspiration, but has chosen a less well-known peripheral story as his subject.

Despite the fact that the overall goal of the epyllion is in many ways to resist its epic counterpart, the two forms bear a number of shared attributes. Homeric poetry traditionally incorporates a number of stylistic, metrical, and syntactical conventions, the combination of which produces a distinct poetic effect. With regards to Catullus’s epyllion, and indeed with most examples of the form, some of these conventions are deliberately utilized or imitated as a means to produce an ‘amplifying’ effect, allowing seemingly minor poems to assume some of the grandeur evoked by epic. A number of these devices are evident in Catullus’s work. For example, the immaculate structure of the poem is due mainly to the poet’s use of a ring composition. Ring compositions, like spiral compositions, are familiar techniques in epic poetry, and are most often associated specifically with Homeric poems. The device itself follows the pattern a-b-c-c-b-a, whereby the poet mirrors the beginning of a section of text with the end, and each of the inner lines also mirrors its counterpart (Tracy in Morris & Powell 361). This
technique relies upon the consecutive repetition of words, phrases, or imagery to create a kind of ‘closed loop’, giving the poem or section of poem a sense of completeness or wholeness of thought.

In “Catullus 64,” a ring composition from line 47 to line 266 allows the smooth integration of the digression, which is equally as significant as the main narrative. The digression itself, which details the lovelorn Ariadne and her despair after losing Theseus, is a highly effective component of the overall poem, since it simultaneously mirrors the theme of love in the main narrative, but also serves to cast that theme in a considerably darker light. Whereas the marriage of Thetis and Peleus is described in glorious, lighthearted detail, the sad tale of Theseus’s betrayal of Ariadne stands in stark contrast. Similarly, the pride felt by the parents of the couple engaged to be married stands in contrast with the tragic suicide of Aegeus, when he sees the dark sails of the ship and assumes that his son has been killed by the Minotaur. This sad comparison is compounded by the comparison of Theseus’s grief over the loss of his father with Ariadne’s pain following the loss of her lover.

According to a study by John Warden (1998), “Catullus 64” may use an additional level of structural and thematic parallelism. Warden suggests that the poem contains two “movements”; the first runs from lines 1 to 277, and the second from line 277 to the end of the poem (Warden 398). These sections or “movements” mirror one another by addressing similar themes and subjects using contrasting approaches. Paradoxically, Catullus may actually be pointing out the similarities between Theseus and Achilles by highlighting their differences. The way in which the first section details Theseus’s disgrace after he abandons Ariadne and causes his father’s suicide appears at first to contrast strongly with the glory of Achilles. However, these seemingly dissimilar men are gradually revealed as being more comparable, as both are
celebrated heroes, and in fact Achilles is actually described using much of the same language as Theseus earlier in the poem (Warden 411). Both men’s fates are described using parallel similes: Theseus is compared to a tree being ripped from a mountain side by the wind, and Achilles is compared to a field of wheat being cut down by a reaper (Warden 410).

As is typical of most epyllia, the immortals who are described in “Catullus 64” serve only as supporting characters, while the main focus is on humanity. The song of the Fates (Parcae) is the only significant dialogue in the poem; this song is lengthy, stretching from lines 323 to 381, and is reinforced with the echoing refrain “Spindles run on, drawing threads for the weft, run on!” (Catullus lines 323-81). This speech or song is made in the form of a prophecy, which foresees the birth of the hero Achilles and his glory against the Trojans, thereby invoking grander epics like The Iliad.

More significantly, the poem closes with an observation of the disordered and uncivilized state of humanity, which the narrator infers to be the main reason why the gods no longer choose to interact harmoniously with mortals on earth:

But after the earth was stained with unspeakable crime
and all chased justice from their desirous minds,
and brothers suffused their hands with brother’s blood,
and son abandoned mourning of dead parents,
and father yearned for funeral of eldest son
to freely own the springtime of a daughter-in-law unwed,
and godless mother lay herself beneath unknowing son
and, godless, did not fear to pollute the gods of hearth and home:
then all things speakable, unspeakable, jumbled in evil madness,
turned the gods’ mind of justice away from us. (lines 397-406)

In the opening section of the poem, before the digression begins, the narrator draws our attention to the red cover of the “the goddess’ wedding bed,/ bright white with Indic ivory, its cover colored crimson/ by dye, rose-red, from the shells of the sea” (lines 48-49). This image is directly paralleled by a later passage which also describes red cloth, though this time with respect to the sails of a ship: “Then I shall hang stained sails from the swaying mast,/ as what befits my griefs and torched intent/ is linen sailcloth dark with rust-red Iberian dye” (lines 225-27). The imagery of the two scenes is repetitive, but is in strong opposition. The “rust red” (line 225) sails of the ship bearing Theseus home is an image of far less pleasant sensations than the finer description of the “rose-red” bed cover. These two passages stand deliberately in stark contrast to one another: the first generates positive affect by illustrating the ivory throne that “glows” in magnificent palace halls, and the bed itself is also adorned with it. In comparison, the second passage describes the grim scene of Theseus returning to his father’s palace, having forgotten to change the sails as a sign that he has survived the Minotaur, and Aegeus committing suicide by throwing himself from the cliff’s edge.

The mirroring effect of the ring composition within the digression gives the reader the sense of unified thought and imagery. Grander imagery, such as the references to immortal gods including Jupiter, to vast mountain ranges, to great heroes and kings such as Achilles and Minos, and to the Fates and Nereids, all evoke epic themes. The very mention of Peleus evokes the great sagas: the Argonauts, Achilles, and the Trojan War. By borrowing such subjects, the epyllion imitates its grander counterpart, while still retaining power of imagery through its compression. Despite these grand themes, the poem still centres on the lesser-known, though still important, story of Ariadne, which is highly typical of the epyllion form.
“Book 8” from The Metamorphoses

Ovid

1st Century BCE

Rome

113 lines

Ovid’s Metamorphoses is a sentient piece of poetic literature which has influenced many writers of various nationalities since its composition. Ovid (43 BCE – 17 BCE) himself is credited with several poetic works, but The Metamorphoses stands out as the only extant example of his poetry that was written in dactylic hexameter rather than in elegiac couplets. The epic work itself is divided into fifteen books, which are further subdivided into episodes identified by the names of the characters involved.

The episode that describes Baucis and Philemon (Met. 8.611-724) has been identified as an epyllion within the larger narrative. This arrangement is similar to the contemporary concept of a ‘novel-in-stories’, since this particular epyllion may be read in the context of the greater work as a whole or, owing to its careful structuring and unity of thought, may be treated as an isolated entity. Interestingly, the presence of an epyllion within The Metamorphoses is uncontested; it is the form of the work as a whole that has proven difficult to categorize. Most scholars place Ovid’s Metamorphoses within the epic poetry tradition, as this is the form it most closely resembles, although this classification does not seem entirely correct.

The structural framework of Ovid’s Metamorphoses is deeply complex. What at first appears to be simply an epic is in fact comprised of a number of genres, including epyllion, tragedy, and elegy, each one playing off the others. The Metamorphoses incorporates a number of epyllia, each of which is discernible by a digression within a framing story. In fact, the Aeacus
and Cephalus epyllion in Book 7 contains not one, but two digressions, one of which is actually a secondary epyllion within the larger framing one (Pechillo 35). This high level of structural sophistication represents a significant advancement in the development of the epyllion, demonstrating its flexibility and applicability to a variety of forms. *The Metamorphoses* is similar to the epic in terms of its great length and dactylic meter; however, it differs from typical epic form in both style and in its treatment of epic subject matter.

The Baucis and Philemon story that is found in Book 8 is, as previously stated, is unquestionably an example of epyllion. The fact that Ovid is the first and only poet of antiquity who is known to have recorded this tale (Griffin 62) is in agreement with one of the epyllion’s primary functions: as a place for new narratives or unusual perspectives on traditional tales. The actual lineage of the story is uncertain; however, some scholars believe that it was first told in Asia Minor. Furthermore, claims have been made suggesting that Ovid’s poem was strongly influenced by, or even copied from, Callimachus’s epyllion *The Hecale*, though this point remains under rigorous debate (Griffin 62-3).

The story described by the epyllion “Baucis and Philemon” is highly moralistic in tone, not unlike the later ‘tale’ form. The couple live together in a small hut in the forest. Despite their desperate situation, they accept their poverty and live happily together for many years. One day Jupiter and Mercury, disguised as mortals, enter the village looking for lodgings, but at each house they visit they are turned away. Eventually, they arrive at the hut of Baucis and Philemon, who welcome the gods into their house and offer them all that they have. Jupiter and Mercury reveal their true identities to the pair, then swear an oath that they will punish the villagers for denying them accommodation. In return for their hospitality, however, Jupiter and Mercury lead their hosts up a nearby mountain just as the village is completely flooded with swamp water. The
flood eventually engulfs all of the land and destroys the houses of the village’s other inhabitants, though the hut of Baucis and Philemon is preserved. Their house is transformed into a temple, where the pair devote the rest of their lives as priests. Before leaving, the gods offer to grant them a single wish, to which they reply that the only thing they desire is to die at the same time so that neither one would have to live without the other’s company. When they die years later, Baucis is transfigured into a lime tree and Philemon becomes a neighbouring oak, so that their branches remain intertwined for eternity (lines 679-724).

The simple story described in Book 8 demonstrates classic epyllion subject matter. First and foremost, it is a love story, which centres around characters who for all intents and purposes would not normally be seen as heroic, but who are described in a way that casts a new perspective on their ordinary lives to make them appear extraordinary. The gods are featured within the poem, but are not the primary focus, nor described in any great detail. The majority of the narrator’s attention is directed toward the hospitality offered to travellers by Baucis and Philemon and to the lengths to which they go to ensure their two guests receive the very best treatment possible. As a result, Baucis and Philemon’s impoverished situation is transformed before their guests’ very eyes and the readers’, as the couple place an old mattress on a wooden frame to serve as a couch, which they cover with cloths intended only for use during sacred festivals. They provide the gods with what food they have, and even go so far as to offer to sacrifice to the gods their own goose, which they kept as their only guard against intruders, before the two travellers reveal their identities to their hosts. In this way, Baucis and Philemon demonstrate that, although they live in poor and inhospitable conditions, they, like the great epic heroes, have “no poverty of spirit” (line 678).
Although this summary of ancient epyllia is not extensive, it does reveal a development of the form over time as poets gradually began to move away from simple representation and storytelling to more tightly structured poetic narratives. Over time, poets of the epyllion also began to experiment with non-linear plotlines, frequently employing techniques such as **ecphrasis** to redirect readers’ attention between past and present. Although the ancient conception of the form had diminished in popularity, writers of the following centuries began to remodel the epyllion into a slightly altered form, one that continued to attract the attention and interest of writers for centuries to come, including those of the Renaissance and Romantic Periods.
Chapter 3:
The Genesis and Evolution of the Ancient Epyllion

Poetry that is typically identified as ‘epyllia’ is frequently classified as such according to what characteristics are missing as much as those that are present, making it a particularly difficult form to recognize. In many cases, the epyllion form may be considered, at least in part, to have been invented as a convenient miscellaneous category for any narrative poem written in dactylic hexameter that features some form of heroic subject matter yet cannot be called “epic” or any other similar form such as “lyric” or “hymn,” because of inherent divergences from typical views of what elements those forms are traditionally expected to include. For this reason, in order to trace the history of the epyllion, it is important to differentiate it from other contemporary forms when the epyllion is believed to have been created. Most important of these is ‘epic proper’, or ‘grand epic’, a form which many believe to have been the parent of epyllion, or at the very least to have developed parallel with it (Bierl in Baumbach and Bar 115). Whether or not the epyllion is simply a minor derivative or imitation of epic, or rather if its development might actually mark a significant divergence from or resistance to traditional Homeric epic, remains under debate. Whatever the answer, epyllion cannot be defined, let alone understood, without first being placed in the context of its lengthy counterpart: epic.

EPIC:

According to Classics scholars, the term ‘epic’ is a fairly general identifier which refers to a variety of lengthy narrative poems written in dactylic hexameter. It is the oldest and most widespread literary form in the world (Hainsworth 3). Indeed, it is thought to have been used by
other people such as the Indo-Europeans even before the Hellenes (Toohey 6). Greek oral epic is believed to have come from the Mycenaean Period, possibly from as far back as the 15th century BCE, though this theory is contested by a number of scholars (West in Toohey 6). There are two main types of ancient epic: (1) the primary epic, and (2) the secondary epic. Primary epics are composed and transmitted orally, and traditionally involved the use of a structure reliant on repetition, which is believed to have been designed to assist the bard in accurate recitation (Toohey 11). Secondary epics are those composed and/or transmitted by being written down (Toohey 11). Despite the distinction between these two basic categories, Hainsworth notes that techniques of antiquity still resound strongly in later literate ages (Hainsworth 5).

Epic poetry performed many social and traditional functions, not least of which was the organization and preservation of both myth and history central to cultural identity:

Narrative is the formal root of the epic, but not just any narrative. The primitive phases of most cultures provide examples of myths and folktales, stories by which men and women have sought to explain the world or escape from its miseries. There are also sagas to record success and eulogies to commend it. The seed of the epic is sown when these are blended, given metrical form, and cast into the narrative mode of ‘heroic poetry.’ (Hainsworth 5)

Thus, the fundamental nature of the subject matter and the function of epic poetry resulted in its wide use.

In time, subcategories arose of which the most important is the ‘mythological epic’ (or the ‘heroic epic’), which represents the Classical epic in its most pure form (Toohey 2). The narratives of these poems tend to focus upon the lives of heroes and mythological figures, as well as on the relationship between mortals and the immortals. Mythological epics feature an elevated
style and seek primarily to glorify the past (Toohey 2). The ‘chronical epic’ (or ‘annalistic’), on the other hand, deals with actual historical events. These poems tend to describe lengthy events lasting several generations (Toohey 4). In contrast, the ‘commentary epic’ covers only a limited time span, and commonly focusses on themes of war and deeds of specific generals (Toohey 4).

The ‘didactic epic’ or the ‘teaching epic’ is a relatively large group that may be subcategorized based on subject matter, including ‘scientific’, ‘philosophical’, and ‘technical’ epic. Religion is often a key theme of these poems (Toohey 5). Finally, there were ‘comic epics’, which frequently were parodic in nature (Toohey 5). Such enormous variety and specificity of distinction between categories seen in the epic poem stands in stark contrast to the uncertainty and ambiguity presented to those attempting to establish criteria by which to classify epyllia.

The epic is a relatively complex poetic form which normally includes a few core thematic and syntactic components, among any number of combinations of lesser parts. According to Hainsworth, “Epic poetry has many aspects, and an excess in one quality must be allowed to compensate for a deficiency in others” (Hainsworth 2). The primary purpose of the grand epic appears to be the glorification of humanity (‘klea andrōn’). Themes of religion, civilization, and nostalgia for the past are also prominent in most extant examples of the form (Toohey 7-8):

This expansiveness is at the foundation of epic, for primary epic poetry is heroic poetry writ large, its range extended and its sights deepened. At the very least the epic puts people, and therefore feelings, hope, despair, sorrow, and triumph, into the events of the heroic lay; at its best it spreads itself over the whole mass of traditional knowledge. A deeply serious genre, the epic must be more than storytelling. (Hainsworth 7)
The second thematic consideration of grand epic is the phenomenon known as the ‘heroic impulse’ that describes the motivation that drives a hero to fight or to conquer (Toohey 9). This motive to fight plays a core role in the Homeric epic narrative, while later epic poems typically involved additional dimensions of meaning:

The epic poet extended the tales of heroic vengeance that lay at the heart of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* into extended homilies on the meaning of life as their audiences would have understood it. He aimed high, and it was needful that he did, for there is a certain pretentiousness about the mere size of an epic that calls for a corresponding grandeur in conception to sustain it. (Hainsworth 8)

The character of the epic hero is traditionally portrayed as an individual of higher social rank who is usually described as being tall, good-looking, and strong, with superior physical ability (either athletic or militaristic) and courage. Less commonly, the epic hero is described as possessing superior intelligence (Toohey 9-10), as in the case of Homer’s Odysseus.

In terms of syntactic and structural composition, the epic is a distinctly complex form. Indeed, “the epic is not simple, but it is single” (Winnifrith, Murrany, Gransden 115), despite its immense length compared to other poetic forms. Epic poets achieved singularity and unity of expression by integrating techniques that established parallelism and symmetry into their narratives. By far the most integral and well-recognized of these used in Homeric epic is the simile. Some believe that the Homeric simile (which may be seen as simple relative to those found in written epic) is a purely artistic enhancement, rather than a meaningful component (Toohey 16). Others argue that its inclusion is obligatory (Hainsworth 118). Related to the simile is the ‘situational parallel’, where one character’s story or actions reflect those of another elsewhere in the poem. This technique is often built through the use of narrative (Toohey 14).
In the early Ptolemaic period, short poems with mythological themes and strong narratives became increasingly common, and the question of whether brevity should (or could) be valued over great length was brought forth by both poets and readers alike. The ultimate result of this debate was the desire for a new poetic form, one which could compensate for the various flaws perceived in grand epic (Gutzwiller 1).

The Homeric vision of the bard was of a person who seeks to influence his audience in three respects: (1) to entertain, (2) to celebrate the glory of men, and (3) to bring about a significant emotional reaction (Murray 5). The Homeric bard held as important a position in society as craftsmen or heroes, in that he was perceived as performing a public service and providing a connection between the masses and the elite (Murray 6). “Traditional art is a public art, and when art has a public character, we should look for its social function. In the most general terms a community sees reflected in heroic poetry an image of itself that it likes to see, and in seeing it the community is encouraged” (Hainsworth 6). This positive portrayal of society ultimately imparted a stronger sense of social unity and pride. What is more, as Orange suggests in his essay “Alice Munro and a Maze of Time,” “Our memories tend to give our experiences of life a legendary quality” (Orange 86). Thus, contemporary literature is capable of illusions of the legendary or epic simply through the integration of self-reflection or individual recollection of experience.

Bards were regarded as possessing a strong relationship with the divine (Murray 7). According to Castelvetro, those characteristics with which one is endowed naturally and which cannot be attained through one’s own efforts (such as poetic imagination, courage, beauty, etc.) were considered by the ancients to be divine gifts (Murray 7). The divine powers (especially the Muses) were believed to be capable of both giving such gifts to those who were worthy of them,
and also of taking them away from those who abused them (Murray 8). Like the power of prophecy, poetic imagination was often bestowed by the gods as a form of compensation for certain other shortcomings or losses, the most notable of which was blindness – interestingly, Homer himself is said to have been blind. Poetic ability and the power of prophecy were given in exchange for some fault or disadvantage (Murray 9). The loss of physical sight can be interpreted as the loss of knowledge, since the two Greek terms ‘ideiv’ (meaning ‘know’) and ‘oida’ (meaning ‘see’) are related (Murray 10).

According to Crump, “The [ancient] epyllion seems to have died out with Ovid, while grand epic, which the Neoterai had made unpopular, comes to its own again owing to the enormous popularity and influence of The Aeneid. The epic poets of the Silver Age followed the tradition of the Vergilian epic; the successors of the epyllion writers are the European poets, who drew their inspiration from Ovid” (Crump 48). Virgil’s Aeneid had long-lasting influence over numerous writers centuries after the work was published. The writers of the European Renaissance in particular were strongly affected by Virgil’s epic (Hainsworth 3).

The critics of the Renaissance, however, with Cardinal Vida at their head, condemned Homer by the standard of Virgil: a persistent view but patently wrong. Virgil displayed decorum, or sense of propriety and order, and also a moral purpose, all of which the age desired and lacked and did not find in Homer, a barbarian author whose style seemed prolix, inconsistent, and repetitive and whose heroes were too earthy for cultivated readers. (Hainsworth 4)

Homeric poetry survived in Greece as a result of two main factors: first the advent of a written alphabet sometime in the 8th century BCE, which allowed writers to transcribe oral performance to written text; second a heightened sense of respect toward the author which
guaranteed the works’ preservation, even after the epic poet’s popularity was slightly obscured by the beginnings of another key poetic form: the lyric (Hainsworth 8).

LYRIC:

‘Lyric poetry’ is a relatively broad term used to describe any verse that recited with musical accompaniment. Technically, this term can therefore be applied to epic, or virtually any other poetry created in pre-literate Greece. General use of the term, however, typically excludes the epic and instead employs it to describe elegiac and iambic verse, which originated in Ionia in the 7th century BCE (Trypanis 80). Poets of this time, including Stesichorus and Archilochus, preserved much of the language and expression of Homeric poetry, but made a definite transition away from Homeric form, and instead chose to develop narrative choral lyric poetry (Hainsworth 43). These poems, often of a personal nature, were probably in use in societies without literacy or writing systems; the first individual to actually record a poem in writing was Archilochus of Paros (mid-6th century BCE), an event which marks a great advancement and shift in Greek literary history (Trypanis 81).

The seventh century BCE saw the emergence of one poet in particular who greatly influenced both the elegy and the iambic poetry being produced in Greece, and who was commonly considered comparable to Homer himself. Archilochus of Paros worked primarily as a mercenary in Euboea and the surrounding territory, and his elegiac works were based primarily on his military experiences (Trypanis 83). Although few examples of these works remain, it is clear that Archilochus provided several vital contributions to Greek poetry, many of which eventually affected the subjects, styles, and structures that future poets chose to pursue (Trypanis
Moreover, Archilochus’s poetry also had great impact on later Roman writers, including Horace, who employed a similar style in his own iambic verses (Hainsworth 79).

Archilochus’s verses were distinctly anti-heroic in nature and strongly resisted the portrayals of war that had been previously depicted by Homer and his successors. The protagonists of these poems were typically depicted using powerful realism; they were distinctly ‘human’ and inherently flawed in their cowardice and weakness of character, traits which were largely unexplored in the depictions of Homeric heroes (Trypanis 84). In contrast, heroes of Homeric poetry were romanticized, with relatively little attention paid to their flaws. For example, The Iliad actually portrays Achilles as achieving his highest level of glory when he is in fact, from a human perspective, at his lowest and most cruel – specifically, when he captures and torments Hector. Similarly, Odysseus’s sharp wit is dulled by rash or reckless behavior (Winnifrith, Murray, Gransden 115). Whereas Homer most often chose to depict humanity using a more detached manner, Archilochus integrated a strong sense of the intimate and the personal into his portrayals (Trypanis 85).

The style of lyric poetry seems to have varied greatly depending on where it was composed, and as a result is often classified based on its geographic place of origin. Although the act of writing and performing poetry was work initially reserved for professionals, amateurs in this field became gradually more widespread (Trypanis 81). The ability to transcribe poetry to a stable, unchanging medium provided poets with the opportunity to experiment with specific, calculated structuring and diction, and to create more complexly engineered poems than oral culture had previously allowed (Toohey 18). As literacy and writing systems became more advanced and more popular, and poets were able to record their work, the issue of intellectual property and the desire of poets to protect their original verse became increasingly relevant to the
academic and popular scene (Trypanis 81). Earlier practices of poetic creation were based heavily on shared intellectual property; in these circumstances, poets consistently copied, borrowed, or paraphrased the verse of others as a matter of routine, and the issue of authorship was heavily subordinate to the effect of the work itself. Later poets deliberately sought to establish authorship of their creative works by any means possible. In some cases, the desire to identify a poem as one’s own drove some poets to incorporate their own name into the verse itself to prevent others from claiming authorship (Trypanis 81). The ability to transcribe and preserve literature was a key step in the development of poetic creation, not least because it has left some tangible record of how such works were composed and how the various genres they belong to evolved over time.

In addition to simple preservation and evidence of authorship, the introduction of a writing system had various other impacts on literary Greece. Ultimately, it allowed poets to invent and to develop creative individuality, the culmination of which was the assembling of a body of work recognized as ‘the classics’. The establishment of such a corpus actually appears to have dissuaded later generations of young poets, who chose to develop their own versions of literature rather than attempt to win a place among the older masters of existing forms (Trypanis 82). Similarly, by the 1st century BCE, epic poets had made a definite and conscious shift away from the traditional epic conventions laid down by Homer and his disciples. Poets of Horace’s generation searched for new material in the attempt to break free of the ancient, recycled tales that had been created by the oral tradition of a culture that had come to the end of its time (Hainsworth 54).

The development of lyric poetry was also significant as it introduced pentameter as a standard metrical form, offering an alternative to the hexameter of the Homeric and Hesiodic
epics (Trypanis 82). Various other metrical alterations and additions were made during this period, more so than during any other, but such innovations are too numerous and complex to discuss here. The ultimate effect of this movement was the association, and in some cases the very definition, of certain poetic forms and genres with specific poetic metres. For example, epic poems were written only in hexameter, and epigrams in elegiac couplets (Trypanis 83). Yet several other components of the epyllion that might be used to identify it rarely adhere to such inflexible rules, making the assignment of genre considerably more complicated than for other similar forms.

**EPYLLION:**

The epyllion was a little-known poetic form, and was theorized to have been in existence as early as the 8th century BCE, although the term ‘epyllion’ seems to have first been used by Athenaeus (Gutzwiller). Theocritus, Callimachus, and Apollonius are regarded as the three individuals responsible for the creation and development of the Alexandrian version of the form sometime in the 3rd century BCE (Crump 19). Callimachus’s *Hecale* is believed to be the first true example of the narrative epyllion.

There is no definite indication of who was responsible for the creation of the original epyllion form in the 8th century BCE. Its central stylistic components are attributed to Homer and Hesiod; these poems contain distinct relics of language and meter called ‘Homerisms’ typically associated with Homeric and Hesiodic poetry (Gutzwiller 11). These examples of Homericised writing, however, are almost always in some way altered from the original state, which suggest the modifications were incorporated with the intention of resisting the literary conventions associated with epic proper (Gutzwiller 11). That is, the creators of epyllion imitated
conventional components of epic poetry but reengineered them in such a way that altered their ultimate effect. Thus, audiences are able to recognize the epyllion as a relative of epic poetry, but are equally aware of the ways in which the former differs from the latter.

In general, the epyllion will be no more than 500 lines in length (Crump 22) and diverges greatly from the subject matter of its epic counterpart. Whereas grand epic typically details well-known myths concerning major heroic figures, writers of epyllia predominantly favour descriptions of obscure tales, or even invented new material of their own (Crump 22). For example, Theocritus’s epyllion “The Hylas” establishes itself within the famous Argonautica narrative of Apollonius of Rhodes, but then rapidly diverts attention to detailing the events surrounding Heracles’s search for Hylas which Apollonius fails to describe at any great length. Where epics are most often concerned with ideas of the heroic, epyllia typically favour descriptions of the common or counter-heroic, of women rather than men, of the elderly and children over the young and able, of human frailty and imperfection over grandness (Gutzwiller 11). These poems also tend only to describe the lifespan of a few individuals or, in some cases, a mere isolated event in the life of that individual (Crump 22). The style may be entirely narrative, or else be interspersed with multiple realistic descriptions. Most epyllia feature a minimum of one long speech, and incorporate the dramatic with the narrative (Crump 22-23).

If we accept the Hellenistic Period as the point at which epyllion truly became a discreet poetic form, then we may identify three main stages in the development of the Greek epyllion, each of which is represented by the work of specific poets. The earliest stage is the epic idyll, represented by the works of Theocritus (3rd century BCE). The second, represented by “The Hecale” of Callimachus (2nd century BCE), features a clear yet simplistic plot. The final stage is represented by the work of Euphorion (2nd century BCE), whose poetry is characterized by a
definite plot, the introduction of love, romance, and horror and the exploration of “morbid psychology” (Crump 193).

The epyllion form, in its ancient conception, reached its height during the Alexandrian Age in Greece. The chronology of the literary developments achieved during this time is for the most part uncertain but the definitive features are known. Alexandrian writing is frequently interwoven with demonstrations of an author’s academic learning (Crump 12-13). At best, this can provide an effective and thought-provoking level of interest for a readership. At worst, the outward demonstration of knowledge may seem arrogant, distracting, or simply irritating. In some instances, as often is the case with the poetry of Callimachus, artistry is frequently rendered subordinate to scholarship, and style therefore suffers (Crump 12-13).

The poetry produced by the Greek poets of the Alexandrian Period, followed by that of the later poets in Rome, was characterized by a strong interest in romantic themes; poems produced during this time frequently focus on the heroine (Crump 22) in stark contrast to the grand epic that, as stated earlier, frequently favoured the hero. Initially, the emphasis on romantic subject matter was found primarily in Roman poetry; the first Greek poet to fully embrace this fashion was Euphorion (2nd Century BCE) (Crump 27).

The epyllion’s most distinguishing feature, however, is the digression, which resembles a secondary story contained within the main narrative, often bearing little to no connection with the first in terms of subject (Crump 23). This secondary story acts as an integral component which frequently parallels or relates to the primary one, acting either as a direct reflection of, or as a stark contrast to, the events or the themes of the main story. The digression is present in all extant epyllia, with the sole exception of “The Hylas” of Theocritus (Crump 23).
THE GREEK EPYLLION VS. THE LATIN AND CONTEMPORARY EPYLLION:

The Greek and the Latin epyllia are thought to be linked by the writings of Euphorion of Chalcis and Parthenius of Nicaea (Crump 38). Similar to the development of Greek epyllion, the evolution of the Latin form may be divided into three distinct stages. The first is represented by the work of Catullus. The second is marked by the early years of Virgil and Cornelius Gallus. The third is marked by the period of the great Augustans (Crump 40). Thus, Roman poetry adopted the epyllion form that was already in existence in Greece and continued to develop it:

More accidents of history brought it about that Greek literature shaped Roman literature and that the two literatures together molded the literary ideas of the Renaissance. A different history would have produced a different idea of the epic, or perhaps no epic at all. As it was, the Homeric poems bequeathed a form, a style, and a whole armory of narrative devices to European literature, whereas their Germanic, Romance, and Slavic analogs have died without issue.

(Hainsworth 9)

The fierce persistence and resilience of Greek and Roman epic poetry, including the epyllion, has had a staggering impact on the literature produced by European and, indeed, American writers.

Shorter literature also seems to have been preferred by both writers and readers. Writers were constantly trying to develop new styles and forms, and to introduce previously unchronicled stories or myths into their plots. Thematic material varied, often including romance, but also darker stories that featured morbid or graphic crimes. For much of the Alexandrian period’s audience, literature was an escape from the everyday, and so writers
fulfilled this demand by writing increasingly sensational or shocking tales to maintain interest and popularity (Crump 12-15).

Although there is much speculation surrounding whether the contemporary concept of the ‘epyllion’ is in any way comparable to that used by the ancient Hellenes, the two uses of the term inherently refer to the same thing: a poem of fewer than 500 lines written in hexameter and dealing with epic themes. The modern term was first used in Germany in 1787 by Johannes Gurlitt (Masciadri in Baumbach and Bar 21) and then in 1796 by Karl David Ilgen (Bierl in Baumach and Bar 111), which may mark a key point in history where the epyllion form was in some way ‘reawakened’. It was at this time, with German writers and scholars at the forefront of the Romantic Movement, that there was a marked increase in attention to deeper, more pointed observation of humanity and an intensification of sensation and emotion in literature than what writers of the previous century had chosen to portray:

Poetry … becomes more enthusiastic, authoritative and impassioned; and feeling the necessity of dealing in more powerful emotions than suited the tranquil and frivolous age which proceeded, naturally goes back to those themes and characters which animated the energetic lays of its first rude inventors … This is the age to which we are now arrived (Perkins 95).

Following the legacy of the Weimar Classicist Period in Germany, the Romantic Period experienced a profound reawakening of not only the traditions of antiquity, but also a vested interest in the natural world, in childhood, in peasant life, myth, and romantic themes – all “strange; ways of escape from the ordinary” (Perkins 102), characteristics very reminiscent of those favoured by writers of epyllia.
Chapter 4:

The Reawakening of the Epyllion and the Creation of the Novelle
in the German Romantic Period

After its relatively brief usage in Hellenistic Greece and Rome, the epyllion form declined sharply in popularity following Virgil. Rather than ceasing to exist altogether, however, the epyllion reappeared in what seemed like the most unlikely of places: the Romantic Period in Germany, where the first use of the term epyllion, in its modern conception, emerged in the work of Johannes Gurlitt in 1787 (Masciadri in Baumbach and Bar 21) and that of Karl David Ilgen in 1796 (Bierl in Baumbach and Bar 111). At this key point, in the midst of the Romantic period, the epyllion was resurrected. Following Ilgen, other German writers began to acknowledge, investigate, and discuss the epyllion form. In 1840, Friedrich August Wolf published his edition of *Scutum*, which included references to epyllia. Owing to Wolf’s reputation as an eminent scholar, this concept of the “little epic” diffused rapidly into the work of various other German academics, before penetrating deeper into the rest of Europe and then, later, into North America (Tilg in Baumbach and Bar 31). Epyllion, along with some facets of epic poetry, became integrated into literary conversations on an international scale, and proceeded to influence modern and contemporary short fiction.

BACKGROUND AND CHARACTERISTICS:

The Romantic Period in Germany spread over time into numerous countries and touched a multitude of genres; the specific timespan over which the period is believed to have extended is under rigorous debate, but in approximate terms it is classified as spanning from 1785 to 1830.
(O’Neill 2). In many ways, writers of the period sought primarily to achieve the same goal as those of the Age of Reason: to formulate an ideal humanism (Rehder 238). The literary works produced during this time did not necessarily adhere to traditional conceptions of what Rene Wellek, for example, contended Romantic literature is expected to include: imagination, a view of the world that is focussed on nature, and the use of the mythic or symbolic as a poetic style (O’Neill 2). While some critics claim that Romanticism should be defined, in broad terms, by the return to nature, others argue that the return to the literature and thought of the past is its most definitive trait (Muir 2). Still others, such as M.H. Abrams, argue that the legacy of Schiller and Kant led to the metaphorical representation of secular human history as directly paralleling the chronology of the Bible. Philosophers and writers began to equate the “the loss and future recovery of paradise” seen in the Bible with the historical chronology of humanity’s departure from ignorance into a state of self-consciousness and intellect (Abrams 217).

The Romantic Period was experienced in different ways in a number of different countries over a relatively long period of time. What began as a movement centred in Germany rapidly expanded, reaching not only into the rest of Europe, but also as far as North America. Consequently, only a selection of elements of the movement can be glanced at here. For the purposes of this thesis, I will briefly examine the works of a few key literary figures whose writing is believed to have influenced contemporary practitioners of the short story. The Romantic Period yielded some of the greatest examples of literary achievement beginning in Germany, then extending into Britain and North America. Blake’s work in particular from the later part of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth provides a clear representation of the way in which the Neo-Classical and academic theories of art evolved into the romantic aesthetics that characterized the later period (Larrabee 98). The works of other English poets such as
Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Byron, and Shelley were all influential during this time, and the subsequent criticism about their work has shaped, and continues to shape, literary studies in English dramatically.

The Romantic period is one which frequently defies all typical systems of classification: while most literary periods or movements are identified by essential and, more importantly, quantifiable, features of language, conventions and rules, or chronology, the Romantic Period encompasses a poetic trend, whose title was given retrospectively (Cox 11). From this, it is evident that the label of ‘Romantic’ largely implies the time at which a literary work was written more than the style or structure employed by the writer, which can vary broadly, as can the differences in artistic expression with regard to the degree to which each writer adheres to realistic description. The one shared goal of the authors of the Romantic Period was the pursuit of an expressive style of poetry or prose that combined a strong sense of personal subject and a strong interest in religion, philosophy, and art into one:

Even within these traditions there are a wide range of temperaments, philosophies, and values, and it is often at one’s peril that one ventures a general statement which will be binding on all the ‘Romantic’ poets, dramatists and novelists writing within one particular linguistic context. In the end there is often little more one can say that that there is in evidence an overriding principle of the right, even duty, of unrestrained self-expression, of the exploration of the individual ego, of the passionately subjective response to ideas, to people, to institutions, to “reality” however defined. (Taylor 8)

The predecessors of the Romantic Period, like the Romantics themselves, were profoundly experimental in their approach to literary conventions of style, and this was largely the result of
attempting to re-envision the world following shifts in political, social, and cultural attitudes (Cox 11).

GERMANY:

At this time, with German writers and scholars at the forefront of the Romantic Movement, there was a marked increase in attention to deeper, more pointed observation of humanity and a greater intensification of sensation and emotion in literature than what writers of the previous century had chosen to portray:

Poetry … becomes more enthusiastic, authoritative and impassioned; and feeling the necessity of dealing in more powerful emotions than suited the tranquil and frivolous age which preceded, naturally goes back to those themes and characters which animated the energetic lays of its first rude inventors … This is the age to which we are now arrived. (Perkins 95)

Writers of the Romantic period possessed “a more genuine respect for the reality of art and original creation itself than any of the writers of the 18th century” (Rehder 237). Their goal was to delve into the nature of art itself. However, according to Rehder, “they failed when through their insistence on depth of meaning they obscured again what they had achieved and, in the end, held on to symbols from which the meaning had escaped” (Rehder 238). Yet, at the forefront of the German Romantic Period were a few literary, historical, critical, and philosophical leaders, whose ideas and principles helped to shape the movement.

The Romantic Period was also unusual in that, although writers who are grouped in the ‘Romantic’ category belong to the same literary movement, they frequently came from differing schools of thought (Cox 11). German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, in his
Philosophy of Art, states that humanity attempts to ascribe the same level of meaning to life through art that resides in the natural world experienced by audiences at a subconscious level. Schelling theorized that art is simply the imposition of meaning on objects. “Art, being the faculty of creating and recognizing the organism, is closely related to philosophy, and the artist is akin to the philosopher. As Schelling put it in his theological formula: “it is through the god within that man recognizes the god without” (Schelling in Rehder 238). Whereas writers of the Enlightenment and Classicist Periods strove to engage with the will of their readership, the Romantics aimed to engage with the reader on both the intellectual and the emotional level (Rehder 238). In the hands of the Romantics, poetry became “a mere symbol of the infinite” (Rehder 239). Friedrich Schiller, on the other hand, viewed art as an ‘aesthetic education’ to which perception Goethe added the purpose of the artist which, as he saw it, was to educate others about the ‘cultural’. Adam Muller’s approach to art was to view it as an ‘allegory of the universe’ (Rehder 238).

M.H. Abrams states that there was a distinct shift between eighteenth century thinking that viewed the mind as a ‘reflector of the external world’ and the thinking of the Romantics who possessed a “preoccupation with the office of the emotions in poetic invention” (Abrams 179). The Romantics, Abrams contends, were vitally interested in the use of poetic elements to deliver a more focussed, more impactful, experience on behalf of the reader: “The attempt to account for all the contents and actions of the mind by a minimal number of sensory elements and a minimal number of associative laws … continued to dominate the psychology of the age” (Abrams 177). Through brevity of expression, the Romantics sought to craft a higher level of literature that was condensed and saturated, and that used language to its highest capability.
SHORT FICTION IN GERMANY:

For the purposes of this study, I will focus on a few key German literary figures who used short fiction, including ‘Novellen’ and fairy tale forms, as preferable modes of creative representation. Among these, Ludwig Tieck figured as a prominent leader in literary fiction. Born in 1773, Ludwig Tieck was one of the earliest and foremost writers of the German Romantic Period (Taylor 9). During Tieck’s own lifetime, his birthplace (Berlin) transitioned from the centre of rationalism to that of Romantic thought. Tieck’s illustrious career culminated with the creation of one of the most influential satirical dramas ever produced in Germany, “Der gestiefelte Kater.” Subsequently, Tieck began to write a series of Novellen (Taylor 9). These stories were distinctly realistic, and less romantic, in tone, which might arguably demonstrate a point of connection between existing short tales and the eventual popularity of the contemporary short story.

Later in his career, Tieck wrote The Marchen of Tieck (1797), which was a collection of stories, including “Eckbert the Fair” and “The Runenberg” (Taylor 9). In many ways, the fairy tale was an ideal form for the Romantics, since it comes from ancient roots, and possesses strong components of the mythological. Fairy tales are an excellent register of the various underlying ethical and social beliefs of the culture from which they originate (Taylor 10). The fairy tale attaches symbolic significance to the actions or events of the human world, bringing the supernatural into the human sphere (Taylor 10).

Following Tieck came E.T.A Hoffman, a writer of the Romantic Period who also left a tremendous mark on the German literary scene. Born in East Prussia in 1776, Hoffman worked for several years as a musician, a term which included service as the Kappelmeister at the Bamberg theatre and as director of an opera company, before resigning in favour of a literary
career in 1814 (Taylor 13). During his lifetime, Hoffman was responsible for the production of over seventy literary works, including short stories, but also novels, and sketches, the majority of which were written during the last decade and a half before his death (Taylor 13-14).

Heinrich von Kleist was born in Frankfurt-an-der-Oder in 1777. Although his literary career resulted in only a modest portfolio of works, relative to Tieck and Hoffman, Kleist is one of the most influential writers of the Romantic Period (Taylor 11). Following a brief term of service in the army, Kleist abandoned his military career, and instead returned to Frankfurt, where he enrolled in the University to study a variety of disciplines, including Greek and Latin (Kurrelmeyer v). Kleist also studied philosophy, favouring the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Kurrelmeyer vii), as well as those of Immanuel Kant. The ‘Kantian’ preoccupation with the ultimate futility of human endeavor and existence frequently emerged in Kleist’s own writing, and is believed to have been a prime motivation behind his suicide in 1810.

Kleist’s contributions to German fiction, particularly those made in short fiction, mark significant advances made in literature of the time, even if those works are relatively few in number (Taylor 11-2). His earlier works are predominantly poetic in nature, though he also experimented with theatre and essay-writing. His narratives frequently portray heightened emotions and impossible situations where characters find themselves incapable of finding a solution to the problems they face (Taylor 11).

A key point that should be made about Kleist is his style of writing. According to Francine Prose, Kleist’s Novelle entitled The Marquise of O has more content, more texture, “more sheer narrative” (Prose 110) than many full-length novels. In fact, in her New York Times bestseller Reading like a Writer, Prose is able to discuss a single paragraph by Kleist and the various pieces of information that the reader can immediately glean from it over almost two
pages. Prose’s analysis of Kleist’s *The Marquise of O* speaks to the massive potential of the *Novelle* to assume the scope and expansiveness of the novel, much in the same way as epyllion is capable of mimicking epic.

**THE GRIMM BROTHERS:**

A study of Romantic literary figures would not be complete without mention of two of the most widely known authors of short fiction. One of the most powerful linkages between the Romantic Period experienced in Germany and that in America, and the subsequent production of short stories including work by Canadians such as Alice Munro, was the influence and popularity of the Grimm Brothers. Wilhelm Grimm (1786-1859) and Jacob Grimm (1785-1863) are best known for their contributions to literature through folktale (Zipes 3). Influenced heavily by the Romantic Period in Germany, the Grimms possessed a strong interest in their Germanic heritage. To this end, Jacob and Wilhelm travelled extensively throughout their home territory of Hanau, recording stories told by peasants and labourers as they went. After the stories were gathered, the brothers began to embellish and polish the tales, before eventually publishing their first collection, *Kinder-und Hausmärchen (Tales of Children and the Home)* in 1812 (Zipes 16). This first book was actually, contrary to popular belief, a relatively poorly-received work at the time of its release. It wasn’t until 1823, when the collection was translated into English by Edgar Taylor, and the tales were specifically directed at a young audience (both through a playful tone and also through the incorporation of colourful illustrations), that the stories gained significant popularity (Bronner 187). The tales themselves honoured not only the Germanic past, but also classical literary traditions, including epic. In fact, the original goal of the collection was “presenting the significance of the tales interpreted as *Naturpoisie*, the language and natural
expression of common folk instilled in the present with the poetic spirit of a past golden age” (Bronner 187). In addition to gathering and publishing stories, the Grimm Brothers were also known for their contributions to linguistic studies (in particular, ‘Grimm’s Law’), as well as for printing a history of literature called *Altdeutsche Wälder* (*Old German Forests*). The Grimm Brothers were responsible for editing a number of existing folkloric works.

The reception of the Grimm Brothers’ work in America was overwhelming, not only in the popular eye but also in the field of scholarly study and research (Bronner 184). The Grimm Brothers’ success in America may be attributed to a number of factors: first and foremost, because the tales they recorded were steeped in Romantic ideals; they portrayed the fantastical and the whimsical, the connection of humankind to the natural world, and the enduring legacy of the poetic as being alive in modern life. Secondly, the tales conveyed a powerful sense of patriotism and interest in one’s national heritage, which greatly appealed to an American readership (Bronner 185). The tales proved so popular that they have been recreated through a variety of media, and have been immortalized by the efforts of numerous American artists, directors, and musicians. Possibly the most influential figure in the process of ‘Americanizing’ the Grimms’ fairy tales was Walt Disney, who took the original stories and embellished them to appeal to modern audiences (Bronner 187). In this context, the stories became the basis for films which allowed artists to showcase artistic and technical excellence over a broad spectrum of music, performance, animation, and film (Bronner 187). From this point on, the fairytale and folktale genres became, and continue to be, a readily popular literary form, not only in inspiring creative minds, such as James Reaney, Alice Munro, and Margaret Atwood, but also audiences of both film and literature.
The significance of such overwhelming artistic integration of the Grimm Brothers’ works into American culture lies in the fact that the Grimms provided one of many notable connections simultaneously between the classical past and contemporary short fiction. Although the folk tale and folk poem are, as previously discussed, descended directly from ancient epic, they have had massive influence over modern popular literature and media (Bronner 188). This shared lineage, stemming from the ancient world, forms a connection between antiquity and contemporary brief fiction.

The Grimm Brothers, like many other Romantics, successfully preserved and revitalized conventions of ancient poetry, and in doing so ingratiated themselves with contemporary audiences. As Wilhelm Grimm himself contended, “Those elements, which we meet in all the tales, are like the fragments of a shattered stone, scattered on the ground amid the flowers and the grass: only the most piercing eyes can discover them. Their meaning has long been lost, but it can still be felt and that is what gives the tale its value” (Robert & Powell 45-6).

THE SUBLIME AND THE GOTHIC:

Within the Romantic Period, subcategories of the movement such as the Sublime and the Gothic developed. Their features are important in explaining the roots of the *Novelle*, and indeed in characterizing certain elements in the writing of Alice Munro. The Sublime was described by Edmund Burke, who developed the ideas the Greek writer Longinus formulated (Morris 299-300) between the 1st and the 3rd century. He defined the Sublime as “the aesthetic and psychological response to a kind of beauty that is irregular, strange, disturbing and even frightening” (Crow 6). The result of this is the portrayal of a kind of beauty that is interwoven with a sinister combination of awe and fear (Crow 6). Related to the Sublime is Freud’s notion of
the Uncanny, which relies upon imparting a sensation of strangeness or foreignness, created when what was previously seen as safe is suddenly revealed as being weird or unsettling (Morris 307). The Sublime persisted beyond the temporal boundaries of the Romantic Period, and pervaded the nineteenth century through to the present day (Crow 6).

The Gothic requires deeper consideration, as it is tied strongly to the Novelle. Starting in the 1760s (Paulson 536), the Gothic is, like the Romantic Period, infamous for its difficulty and breadth of definition (Morris 299-300). The Gothic, which was originally marked by its reliance on specific props such as old castles or endangered maidens, is now perceived as a “tradition of oppositional literature,” portraying disturbing, and often terrifying circumstances as the backdrop for a sceptical, ambiguous view of humanity (Crow 2). The Gothic deliberately uncovers the secrets and taboos of the culture from which it comes:

The Gothic insists that humans are flawed and capable of evil, and that the stories we tell ourselves in our history books may leave out what is most important for us to understand. The Gothic patrols the line between waking and dreams, human and machine, the normal and the freakish, and living and dead. As a literature of borderlands, the Gothic is naturally suited to a country that has seen the frontier (a shifting geographical, cultural, linguistic and racial boundary) as its defining characteristic. (Crow 2)

The Gothic allows readers to confront fears, to explore tabooed subjects that otherwise would not be seen as acceptable. It is intrinsically stimulating in nature, often demanding intellectual or imaginative involvement on the part of the reader (Crow 2). The Gothic is also capable of initiating catharsis, allowing readers to confront past injuries inflicted by social, personal, or
political forces (Paulson 536). These essential aspects of Gothic literature, as will be demonstrated later in this thesis, are powerful components behind contemporary short fiction.

From a contemporary Canadian perspective, the Gothic presents a number of interesting scenarios for practitioners of the *Novelle* form. On the one hand, there are ongoing debates concerning whether or not the term Gothic *can* be applied to Canadian literature, since the country is considered to be “too new to be sufficiently haunted” (Sugars vii). On the other hand, some scholars contest that Canada provides an *ideal* canvas for Gothic creation and imagination, owing to its remote landscapes and extreme climates (Andrews in Sugars 208). As a nation defined by borders, Canada presents untold possibilities for Gothic literature; not least is the interface between rural and urban (Andrews in Sugars 210). The vastness of the country necessitates writers to focus on specific sites or regions; this ‘regionality’ has inspired the work of writers such as Alice Munro (Andrews in Sugars 210).

A major facet of this genre is the “Native Canadian Gothic,” a term which Michael Hurley introduced to describe the phenomenon (Andrews in Sugars 210). The Canadian vision of Gothic themes plays heavily upon elements of post-colonialization (Sugars 251). The dichotomy between settler and native cultures, as well as the unease generated by ignorance of native traditions, serves as an inexhaustible source of creative material for writers of the genre. Furthermore, Canada’s rich native culture provides copious inspiration for writers who seek to explore the supernatural (Andrews in Sugars 210). As with most American and European Gothic literature, the Canadian Gothic urges both reader and author alike to explore taboo subjects that are otherwise considered unacceptable or else remain unmentioned (Goldman in Sugars 51).
INFLUENCE ON CONTEMPORARY FICTION:

The Romantic Period was a literary movement unlike any that came before. In considering the development of epyllion across its long history, and the eventual re-representation of the form within today’s short fiction, the German Romantics play a pivotal role in identifying the connection between the ancient and modern forms. The movement’s sphere of influence extended to some of the world’s finest writers of short stories, including Edgar Allan Poe. As Charles E. May has argued:

Poe’s notion of unity and singleness of effect was indebted to the kinds of transformations being worked on the romance, fairy tale, folk tale form by the German romantics. As can be seen in Good’s helpful summary, the theories of the novella by Goethe, Tieck, and Schlegel were central in influencing Irving, Hawthorne, and Poe’s innovations in short fiction. (May xvi)

According to May, Poe’s and Hawthorne’s stories are among the highest order of art (May 62). For Poe, as he argued in his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*, the short story, as evident in the works of Hawthorne, comprises a brief work of prose narrative that may be read in a single sitting, requiring no more than an hour or so to peruse. During this time, the writer is in absolute command of the reader’s conscience (May 61). In contrast, May proposes, it is the inevitable cessation and then resuming of attention that is involved in reading the novel (or epic) that destroys the reader’s sense of engaging with a truly unified work. By sharp contrast, the shorter narrative appears as a singular organism whose various components can be held in the reader’s memory or centre of focus all at once (May 61). Ironically, despite this distinction being so pivotal to the definition of the two forms, “Compression and extension are such universal
characteristics of all poetic narratives, both long and short, that they attract attention only when attention is called to them” (Hunter in Baumbach and Bar 83).

May’s claim that the highest degree of literary or poetic affect can only be achieved within short works may be applied not only to poetic composition, but also to the Novelle form: “We may continue the reading of a prose composition, from the very nature of prose itself, much longer than we can persevere, to any good purpose, in the perusal of a poem. This latter, if truly fulfilling the demands of the poetic sentiment, induces an exaltation of the soul which cannot long be sustained. All high excitements are necessarily transient” (May 60). Consequently, for May, “a long poem is a paradox. And, without unity of impression, the deepest [a]ffects cannot be brought about” (May 60).

The relationship between the epic and the epyllion is comparable in many ways to that shared between the novel and Novelle. Each relies on the other for definition. As perceived in Crump’s quintessential study, the epyllion is generally centred on a single event and only one or two main characters (Crump 23). Likewise, the short story differs from the novel not only in length and unity of thought, but also, as May argues, by virtue of featuring the life of only one or two characters, a single location, and the emotions brought about by a single situation (May 73). Just as the epyllion represents a single unified entity, and not simply an isolated section from an epic, the short story is not identical to, but might resemble, a single chapter or section from a novel; the event or situation that it portrays should stand as a single unified unit that would be in some way weakened or unbalanced by any addition or alteration. As May emphasizes, the short story represents a degree of calculation and balance that is not found in the novel (May 73). “Poe’s paradox that a poem cannot greatly exceed a hundred lines in length under penalty of
ceasing to be one poem and breaking into a string of poems, may serve to suggest the precise difference between the Short-story and the Novel” (May 73).

For May, the short story is, by nature, in comparison to the novel, a far more flexible form, which “If to compression, originality, and ingenuity he [the short story writer] add also a touch of fantasy, so much the better” (May 74). Yet, it is also important to distinguish between the true short story and the story that is simply short. The true short story’s brevity is the result of the concision and the unity of thought that it embodies (May 75).

The short story, May argues, is limitless in its potential, as it may match the realism of the novel or the fantasy of the romance (May 77). “The short-story should not be void or without form, but its form may be whatever the author please” (May 76). In just the same way, the epyllion is not simply a fragmentary form or one whose intensity or precise design suffers from its brevity. It is a form designed to identify all that the epic fails to do, by describing people, events, and ideas not readily visible (or previously of interest) to its readership. The Novelle is heavily reliant on symmetry, but its strength to draw affect from the reader is heightened by the integration of the poetic. The Novelle, sketch, novel, and romance are all interconnected forms that are defined by their relations to one another (May 77). May states that “the novel is the child of the epic and the heir of the drama; but it is a hybrid” (May 78). As May points out, the short story does in fact represent a much earlier form than the novel in the history of literature, although it is one that did not achieve public recognition until the beginning of the nineteenth century (May 78).

Just as the epyllion may be said to have been the product of resistance to the epic form, so too the Novelle may be seen as a reaction against the novel. Following cultural shifts in the Hellenistic period, the value of heroic or epic grandeur faltered. In response, poets began to craft
epics that were shorter in length but still contained all the artistry and magnificence of the long epic (Bierl in Baumbach and Bar 112). As May points out, “Epics were the offspring of an imperfect sense of Art, and their reign is no more. A poem too brief may produce a vivid, but never an intense or enduring impression” (May 60-1). Thus, epyllion represents a middle ground between the brief poem and the longer epic – just as the Novelle finds a middle ground between the tale or anecdote and the novel. Indeed, the Novelle, like its ancient counterpart, the epyllion, strikes an effective balance between the satisfaction of the lengthy composition and the power of effect achieved by the short.
Chapter 5:

Alice Munro’s “Too Much Happiness”:
The Contemporary *Novelle* in the Context of the Epyllion

Despite being one of her strongest works, Alice Munro’s story “Too Much Happiness” has prompted relatively little critical attention. The updated edition of Robert Thacker’s biography *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives* (2011) includes a lengthy discussion of the collection *Too Much Happiness*, which contains a total of ten stories. And Thacker invites further attention to the review that he wrote about *Too Much Happiness* by reproducing it in his latest book, *Reading Alice Munro, 1973-2013*. But although the collection is moderate in size, Thacker makes only passing reference in each of his books to the title story itself. He does note, however, that the story marks an important point in Munro’s career. For by selecting Sophia Kovalevsky as her subject, Munro appears to be deliberately opposing critics’ expectations of her work by rejecting her typical descriptions of life in Southwestern Ontario in favour of a historical fiction that takes place in Europe (Thacker, *Alice Munro* 559). Dennis Duffy, on the other hand, provides more detailed analysis of the story in the essay “Alice Munro’s Narrative Historicism: ‘Too Much Happiness’.” In this study, Duffy focusses on the anatomy of the story, which, as he points out, is broken into five sections, the last of which accounts for approximately a third of the story’s length (Duffy 200). In addition, Duffy places particular emphasis on Munro’s strict resolve to maintain a focussed and uncluttered narrative (Duffy 201).

“Too Much Happiness” frequently strikes Munro’s readership as being atypical of her standard work. Not only is it considerably longer than most of her other stories, but it is also based on historical events rather than involving more purely fictional material. The fact that this
story is so contrary to Munro’s customary style might be one explanation for the reason that so few critics have chosen to focus on it. If, for example, a critic were interested in tracing Munro’s evolution as a writer, beginning with her first collection *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) and concluding with her latest work, it is not surprising that “Too Much Happiness” might be overlooked as an anomaly, one which does not apparently fit the pattern of the writer’s development. Duffy’s essay addresses this very question, beginning by commenting on the way in which “Too Much Happiness” “does not always fit with [Munro’s] earlier narrative practice,” comparing it to the author’s earlier work “The Wilds of Morris Township” from the book *The View from Castle Rock* (2006).

As puzzling as Munro’s apparent sharp divergence from her normal style of writing is, though there are a few similar exceptions in Munro’s work, Duffy identifies an even more surprising issue. In the latter section of his essay, Duffy remarks on the unexpected manner with which Munro handles the historical material in “Too Much Happiness,” placing particular emphasis on the fact that Munro, despite having acknowledged her familiarity with Don H. Kennedy’s biography *Little Sparrow: A Portrait of Sophia Kovalevsky* (1983) in the final lines of her story, chose not to include various intriguing episodes from Kovalevsky’s life. These episodes, such as the anecdote of Kovalevsky’s introduction to mathematics after having found notes belonging to her father from his time spent as an artillery officer, appear “pregnant with fictional possibilities and well-nigh irresistible to a writer” (Duffy 201), but go unacknowledged by Munro. This remarkable rejection of prime creative material, Duffy states, is a tribute to her resolve to keep the narrative focussed and uncluttered, allowing it to remain sharp and uncompromised (Duffy 201). This determination to represent historical events accurately implies
that any adjustments or creative additions that Munro has chosen to make are all the more
significant and must have been made with a distinct purpose in mind.

“Too Much Happiness” is centred on the life of renowned Russian mathematician Sophia
Kovalevsky, whose short though illustrious life and career came to an end at age forty-one at the
close of the nineteenth century. By examining Munro’s story, I will demonstrate the way in
which the epyllion form and its characteristics continue to be used in the present day by writers
of Novellen. Storytelling conventions and models used by ancient epyllion poets remain
applicable even in the context of modern-day literature.

The process of examining Munro’s Novelle “Too Much Happiness” by adopting the same
metrics as one might use in reading ancient epyllia is reasonable given the striking similarities in
style and structure between the two. Historical circumstances suggest that the new form was
introduced at the time that the old was reintroduced into literary conversations and practices in
Romantic Period Germany, which in turn suggests that there is a continuity that exists among the
three periods under review in this study: ancient, romantic, and contemporary. According to
Hainsworth, “the Homeric poems bequeathed a form, a style, and a whole armory of narrative
devices to European literature” (Hainsworth 9). The German writers, artists, and philosophers of
the Romantic Period experienced a marked reawakening of classical themes, but their
preoccupation with the past rapidly became increasingly idealized. Creative minds pursued an
ideal. Thus, many of the images and written works created during this time frequently diverged
from those of antiquity (Butler 6). Yet the influence of the past echoes strongly in the literature
that follows.

The epyllion is by definition a poetic form, whereas the Novelle is generally associated
with prose. However, the way in which Novellen are engineered to create the illusion of
amplitude within a relatively small text dictates that language plays an essential role in building multiple levels of meaning. Longer works of fiction such as novels also require precision and depth of expression, but for the most part this necessity is even greater in the Novelle to the degree to which it aspires to the poetic. It is therefore vital to read Novellen using the focus and sense of fine detail that is important in studying poetry. It is a reasonable and, in fact, quite valuable exercise to read epyllia and Novellen using similar criteria.

**NOVELLEN:**

The German Romantics associated a number of characteristics with the Novelle including, among others, *Episch* (factor of the epic), *Drama* (drama), *Erzählung* (narrative or narration), *Unerhörte* (the unheard of), *Sachlichkeit* (brevity, directness, economy of expression), *Ironie* (irony), *Wendepunkt* (turning point), and *Zufall* (destiny), (Remak 2-3). These basic constituents are still applicable today when discussing brief fiction such as short stories and novellas; yet, as I have sought to show, these terms are also applicable to the study of the epyllion. This suggests that the literatures from these three periods, ancient, romantic, and contemporary are, at least on a basic level, strongly related. This model demonstrates that, even from the earliest phases of its development, the Novelle was designed to contain the same core components as the epyllion. The forms that are frequently categorized as long story, novella, novelette, and short novel, therefore, may all be measured using the same metrics.
“Too Much Happiness”

EPIC:

Theodore Storm describes the novella as “the epic sister of the drama” (Storm in Plouffe xi). The fact that the German Romantics, who were largely responsible for the initial design and popularity of the Novelle, recognized from the beginning the need for brief literature to contain aspects of the ‘epic’ (‘Episch’) is especially significant, as it highlights the way in which epic tradition has transcended history from the ancient world to the present day. This fact suggests that such an epic quality, beginning with grand epic, then becoming redefined and reconfigured within the epyllion form, is the thread which connects the poetry of antiquity with the literature of modernity. In fact, if we accept that the Romantic Period was the most influential force in the creation of the Novelle form, then it is reasonable to assume that in studying Novellen we must necessarily look to the ancient sources which inspired it; indeed, Romanticism itself is widely defined as not just a renewed interest in nature, but also the return to the art and thought of the past (Muir 2). There is an inextricable connection between the ancient past and modernity, and as the largest most influential genre of antiquity, epic, and therefore epyllion, will continue to resound in contemporary literature.

It is clear that Munro is aware of epic tradition, since a number of her stories contain explicit and implicit references to Classical studies. Munro’s story “Chance” from her collection Runaway (2004), for example, is centred on the experiences of Juliet, who has recently become a teacher of Classics while completing her Ph.D. thesis (Munro 52). Towards the end of the story, Juliet imagines Eric’s girlfriend, Christa, as being comparable to Briseis and Chryseis from Homer’s Iliad (Munro 81). In the following story of the same collection, “Soon,” Munro begins
her narrative with a kind of ecphrastic description of a painting, similar to the technique used by poets of the epyllion such as Catullus and Theocritus.

In the case of “Too Much Happiness,” Munro makes several references to mythology and various allusions to past centuries. Later in the story, Munro describes the trip to Paris that Sophia and her husband take: “It was 1870, before Sophia and Vladimir took what they meant to be their study trip to Paris. So deep they were in other dimensions, past centuries, so scant their attention to the world they lived in, that they had scarcely heard of a contemporary war” (Munro 269). Yet again, we see evidence of a degree of preoccupation with the past, and a lack of interest in contemporary society. Even in the midst of pressing contemporary events, the characters – and indeed Munro herself – remain caught up in the past.

DRAMA:

In style, the Novelle bears a number of similarities to ancient epyllion. The epyllion is a form which, according to Crump, frequently employs the dramatic just as Novellen do. Such poems may be entirely narrative, or else scattered with realistic descriptive passages (Crump 22-3). Contemporary brief fiction operates on a similar mixture of drama and realism to heighten sensation. In an interview with Rupert Dastur (2015), Charles E. May states that the Novelle answers “the longing to see dramatic pattern.” The dependence of brief fiction on the dramatic has been perceived by other critics for many decades. For example, as early as 1907, in her book Short-Story, Its Principles and Structure, Albright suggests that “The drama is largely responsible for the brilliant technique which is one of the distinguishing features of modern story-writing” (Albright 10). By nature, Albright contends, the short story is more reliant on drama than the novel is: “In motive, methods, and in its stimulating effect upon the imagination
of the reader, the vivid impressionistic story is more nearly akin to the drama than to the novel” (Albright 10). Indeed, a century later, in his essay “The Craft of the Short Story,” Clark Blaise reaffirmed this connection between drama and story, claiming that brief fiction is a descendent of the drama, and effectively incorporates the power and grandness of that ancestor within a condensed framework (Blaise 181). And although the drama is frequently associated with longer fiction and some poetry, Novellen are by nature highly dependent on dramatic elements. A story which incorporates epic will invariably also involve elements of the dramatic: the two are interdependent. Any allusion to the Heroic Age or to mythological tradition in contemporary literature is essentially dramatic, at least in one sense of the word, as it draws a comparison between the everyday world of today and the glorified image of the ancient world.

NARRATIVE AND NARRATION:

Possibly the most complex features of Munro’s story are her treatment of narrative and narration. Unlike some other of her stories that use a first-person narrator, Munro instead chooses to use a third-person-limited narrator in “Too Much Happiness.” By employing a third-person-limited narrative perspective, Munro’s characters, especially Sophia, retain a degree of the mysterious, since the reader cannot access firsthand the thoughts or experiences in any of their minds. This is an effect that a first person narrative perspective would not allow.

The final pages of the story are devoted to describing the reactions of the other characters to Sophia’s death, and also give some indication of their own fates. Her daughter FuFu, her friend Maxsim, her mentor Weierstrass, and the doctor from Bornholm are all mentioned; each has a sentence or, at most, a small paragraph dedicated to them that is separated from the next by two lines of space. The fact that Munro chooses to adopt an entirely new format in the closing
sections of the story suggests some special purpose and significance. The way in which the reader is presented with a short, direct summation of each character’s life and death, written in the past tense, imparts an abrupt sensation of closure. The fact that the narrator provides specific times and dates makes it clear that the events that were related in the earlier portion of the story are all several decades in the past. It is also clear that the narrator survived all of the characters in the story, at least for some time, since he/she is able to tell us about each person’s death. Thus, it is unclear whether or not the narrator was actually present at the time or even place of the events being retold, or if he/she is at a distance (again of time or space) from those occurrences.

THE UNHEARD OF:

Munro’s Novelle “Too Much Happiness” is based on actual historical events. Sophia Kovalevsky was an esteemed and celebrated mathematician, whose contributions to mathematical theory and practice were profound. Munro’s narrative, however, draws explicit attention to the fact that, although brilliant, Kovalevsky never received equal status to her male colleagues. As a result, the mathematician’s life story represents an interesting middle point, since she achieves high status but at the same time is barred from attaining full recognition for her accomplishments: “Then they had given her the Bordin Prize, they had kissed her hand and presented her with speeches and flowers in the most elegant lavishly lit rooms. But they had closed their doors when it came to giving her a job” (Munro 266). As Munro adds wittily, “They would no more think of that than employing a learned chimpanzee” (Munro 266). Sophia’s life, of which Munro selects only a portion as her subject, is a significant historical story, yet is still sufficiently obscure to maintain the reader’s attention and interest in and of itself, regardless of Munro’s unique technique in relating it.
“Too Much Happiness,” like many of Munro’s stories, places emphasis on the life of a female protagonist. Given the historical period during which the story takes place, the fact that the narrative is told from a female perspective is slightly more “unheard of.” As with most writers of realistic brief fiction, Munro selects characters who represent commonplace or ordinary individuals, emphasizing their humanity and their inherent flaws as human beings. She portrays, however, these characters and the circumstances in which they find themselves in such a way that highlights the unusual, the strange, and even the heroic. For example, in describing Sophia’s brother-in-law, Jaclard, Munro characterizes him as “A hero worn out by his struggle, one who has sacrificed his youth – that was how he might present himself, not without effect. And it was true, in a way. He was physically brave, he had ideals, he was born a peasant and knew what it was to be despised. And she too [Sophia], just now, had been despising him” (Munro 262). Despite being a “despised” peasant, Jaclard is still able to achieve heroic status.

The description of Jaclard’s wife is treated in the same fashion. As Sophia notes, “She is educated, she was a governess but was dismissed for her political sympathies. I am afraid I cannot introduce you to her. She is poor but decent and she still values her reputation” (Munro 262). Here again, without fail, a character of lower social rank is elevated to a higher level, though in this case not to the level of the heroic. Jaclard’s wife’s condition is cast in such a light that highlights the resilience and sense of nobility within the commonplace.

Similarly, Sophia also recounts memories of her sister, Aniuta, who despite living in affluent conditions in “the family estate of Palibino” surrounds herself with imagery and artifacts dating from Medieval Europe (Munro 255). Aniuta clings desperately to the past as a form of self-expression, but this attitude also suggests that the distant past is a time of greatness that even
the uppermost luxuries of the present cannot attain or exceed. In this way, the past is honoured and glorified, and is depicted as superior.

**BREVITY, DIRECTNESS, AND ECONOMY OF EXPRESSION:**

Despite the fact that the story is relatively short compared to a full-length novel, Munro achieves a grandness of scope and amplitude that might be expected of a lengthier form much in the same way that epyllion poets sought to artificially expand their brief poems to mimic epics using various techniques of structure, style, and subject. “Too Much Happiness” is more complex than most of Munro’s other stories; this might at first appear to be simply a function of its longer length, but it is also based heavily on character development and structure. Munro uses a kind of realism that allows her to offer a more balanced perspective on both the lighter and the darker elements of human existence. Similarly, the most significant achievement of the epyllion is its revolutionary, and previously unexplored, approach to the study of humanity – deliberately presenting humankind on a small scale, resulting, paradoxically, in an emphasis on the great scope and complexity of individual potential and agency.

On a basic level Munro’s story is, similar to its ancient counterpart, centred round a female protagonist, with a narrative that features love as a prominent theme. The story details a relatively limited number of characters, of which only a few are central to the plot. Although the story is only fifty-seven pages in length, Munro creates a sense of amplitude comparable to that of a lengthier form, such as a novel, much in the same way that the epyllion imitates the grandness of epic proper.

One of the ways Munro succeeds in creating a sense of expansiveness while maintaining economy of expression is through her use of language, specifically the use of metaphors and
parallelisms. By using these devices, Munro is able to create multiple layers of meaning, often to seemingly innocuous details, ensuring that every sentence, indeed every word, carries weight. Munro also visibly plays with the concept of historical fiction – although the framing story is based on actual events, the finer details are evidently added by the author herself. These seemingly minor additions like, for example, the passage where Sophia is seated on the train and is reading the works of Heinrich Heine in the original German (Munro 271), are key to our understanding of Munro’s craft. The detail itself does not appear artificial or out of place; indeed Munro is perfectly justified in incorporating Sophia’s knowledge of German language, since Sophia hopes that reading Heine will “assist in bringing the German language to the surface of her mind” (Munro 271) while she travels to meet her German tutor. This information does not seem out of place or in any way forced, but Munro’s decision to use Heine, and not some other writer, is clearly very deliberate. Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) was a Jewish poet and essayist who lived during the Classicist and Romantic Periods in Germany (Skolnik 65). He was in many ways a rebel, and his writings were frequently censored by the authorities. In fact, later on, during the Nazi Regime, several of his works were banned and burned (Skolnik, 68). Heine, similar to Sophia herself, was an eminent figure in his field, though his achievements were never fully celebrated as they should have been. Heine perceived the Romantic Period primarily as a revival of the past (Skolnik 48) and used imagery evoking the ancient world in his poetry (Skolnik 54). Thus, by evoking the name of Heine in her story, and by using great economy of expression, Munro simultaneously drives the plot forward and also draws a parallel between her own narrative and other significant historical events that help to form a commentary on the incidents she describes.
IRONY:

Throughout the text, Munro repeatedly places the rational disciplines of mathematics and physics against the intuitive disciplines of poetry, art, and expression. At the beginning of the story, Sophia leaves Maxsim in Paris and returns home to Stockholm after having received the Bordin Prize. As she sits in her apartment, she recalls a conversation she had with Maxsim:

“Did you know I’m part German?” she had said to Maxsim.

“Of course. How else could you be such a prodigy of industry? And have your head filled with mythical numbers?” (Munro 251)

The juxtaposition of the words “mythical” and “numbers” appears unexpected and ironic, but the combination also represents a firm connection with ancient civilization by invoking the word “mythical”. This contradiction is paralleled later in the narrative, as Sophia recalls her first encounter with her mentor, Weierstrass: “He had to be careful about saying what he really believed – that there must be something like intuition in a first-rate mathematician’s mind, some lightning flare to uncover what has been there all along. Rigorous, meticulous, one must be, but so must the great poet” (Munro 270). In this way, Weierstrass and, by extension, Munro, make the unexpected connection concerning the way in which the rational field of mathematics is heavily reliant on intuitive sensibility and even the language of poetry, of metaphor, “some lightning flare.” At the same time, there is the suggestion that mathematicians who operate at the highest level within their field are required to exercise the same degree of rigor and precision as the poet, and vice versa.

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The initial emergence of the epyllion form was in response to the inadequacies or deficiencies perceived in epic poetry, not only in matters of style and structure, but also in
subject. The success and historical longevity of the epyllion form resulted largely from the fact that it simultaneously honoured the traditional tales and also enhanced these by approaching them from atypical narrative perspectives. Writers often revitalized the old familiar tales by intertwining them with new, unheard (either because they were little-known or else entirely fictitious) mythological stories, thereby creating the potential to re-establish their relevance, and, therefore, interest, for more contemporary audiences. The tradition of heroic poetry did not seek to document history with any great accuracy, but rather experimented with the chronology and dimension of events (Hainsworth 12). The role of Heroic Poetry, therefore, was more related to national identity and the glory of the past, and less about actual occurrences.

The Age of Heroic Poetry was relatively receptive to the works of its predecessors, however it was an entirely unreceptive space in terms of the works of later poets (Hainsworth 15). The heroic canon was comprised of a specific set of characters, events, and sagas, and did not accept any additions. As a result, over time the Heroic Age of poetry became obsolete, and also an increasingly arid space for poets and artists who sought to extract any residual facet of the unexplored in the old tales (Hainsworth 16). As heroic poetry in Greece archaized, later poets were forced either to archaize their own work through anachronism, or else find new techniques in order to re-contextualize the old world within contemporary society (Hainsworth 16). In the latter case, the epyllion became a viable option for creative minds to break with convention and poetic tradition.

Our current generation of short fiction writing represents from one point of view yet another stage in the ongoing development of the epyllion form. Contemporary authors such as Alice Munro can be seen as employing and developing many of the types of structural and stylistic techniques that were used by ancient writers such as Callimachus, Theocritus, and
Catullus to create their own works. As with many works of contemporary short fiction, Munro’s narratives feature the lives of common people, but illuminate their stories in such a way that casts them in an epic or heroic light, yet without unduly romanticizing them. The finer, seemingly less significant aspects of the everyday become magnified, frequently recalling the ancient past as a source of inspiration and information. According to Hugh Hood: “the myths at the core of the story are always ongoing…. Myth exists to give us this reassurance of the persistence of some of the fundamental forms of human action” (Hood in May, xx). The act of correlating the age of heroes with the present is a reflection of the resonance of certain thematic material, but is also on another level an acknowledgement of an ancient methodology which remains a powerful framework for contemporary storytelling.

TURNING POINT:

The concept of the turning point in brief fiction is one which is frequently left to debate, as readers will identify different moments in a text that they believe to represent the key shift from uncertainty to enlightenment. In the case of “Too Much Happiness,” this is very much the case, as there are a number of points at which the narrative appears to make a significant shift from obliquity to understanding on the part of the protagonist. One such episode is the scene where Sophia sits at the bedside of her mentor Weierstrass, who is sick with heart disease and pneumonia. Just before she departs, Weierstrass admits that:

“Truly, I sometimes forget that you are a woman. I think of you as – as a –”

“As a what?”

“As a gift to me and to me alone.”
… She held back her tears till she had said goodbye to his sisters and left the house. I will never see him again, she thought. (Munro 280)

At this moment, the reader is reminded of the opening scene in the graveyard, where Sophia observes that one of them (her or Maxsim) would die soon. Her thought that “I will never see him again” might at first suggest that she does not expect her mentor to live much longer, as he is in exceedingly poor health, but in fact Weierstrass outlives his prodigy, and it is Sophia who meets her demise at the story’s end. Whether or not this is what Sophia consciously means by the phrase “I will never see him again” or if she even conceives of it as a possibility is left to the reader to decide.

Regardless of what point in the narrative the reader identifies as the turning point, the concept of such an occurrence is a core facet of Munro’s craft. In her book Alice Munro’s Narrative Art, Isla Duncan stresses the powerful use of a turning point in most if not all of Munro’s stories, as a device that plays a pivotal role in generating meaning. As Duncan points out, “Munro herself uses the phrase ‘queer bright moment’ to refer to the phenomenon; the moment when her narrator recognizes a particular truth, or an evasion of truth. For the character, it is accidental, but, in terms of Munro’s narrative design, it is, of course, far from being so” (Duncan 72). In his essay “Notes on the ‘Canadian’ Short Story” Clark Blaise terms this occurrence “a stunning glare,” which, Blaise claims, “marks [Munro’s] style” (Blaise 165). Owing to Munro’s subtlety, while we as readers may become conscious of such moments as they occur in the text, frequently we are only able to recognize such moments in retrospect. These turning points often operate more as transitions in narrative perspective than as dramatic events.

The task of identifying a specific turning point is complicated significantly by Munro’s treatment of time – a factor that represents a crucial though complex consideration of
narratological studies. According to Russian scholars of the formalist movement, time exists within a narrative on two distinct levels: Fabula, time represented in actual chronological order, and Suzjet, events considered in the order that they are presented within a text (Jong in Morris and Powell 319). It is the interrelationship between these two levels – and the way in which the reader is obliged to shift back and forth between them – that gives a narrative dimension and depth. Events which are necessarily relayed on the page as being one after the other may, in fact, be occurring simultaneously within the story or poem or story. The task of identifying a specific turning point in Munro’s story is made significantly more difficult, by the fact that her narrative oscillates between past and present in a rapid and sometimes erratic manner.

In his book Reading Alice Munro, 1973-2013, Munro’s biographer Robert Thacker states that she uses an “essentially rhetorical approach to fiction, because, like their author, her protagonists are both participants and observers. Through the interaction of these two modes of perceptions, Munro is able to present coherently the whole significance of a story’s dramatized events” (Thacker 36). Although Thacker himself does not make this connection, it is this approach to narrative that is in effect in “Too Much Happiness” as the reader is aware of multiple levels of time simultaneously: we are aware that the events being described are historical; however, the narrative is told primarily as they occur, with numerous flashbacks being recalled intermittently. In this way, we are made aware of Sophia’s original past observations and experiences, as well as her thoughts on those incidents with the added benefit of retrospection as she ages, though this does not always ensure that the characters are aware of their fates.
DESTINY:

“Too Much Happiness” opens with Sophia and Maxim Kovalevsky walking together through a graveyard, occasionally pausing to record inscriptions from the tombstones. From the very beginning, Munro incites anticipation in the reader by foreshadowing the inevitable death of one of the characters:

“You know that one of us will die,” she says. “One of us will die this year.”

Only half listening, he asks her “Why is that?”

“Because we have gone walking in a graveyard on the first day of the New Year.”

“Indeed.” (Munro 247)

This anticipation is reinforced repeatedly throughout the narrative, through descriptions of Sophia’s deteriorating health.

In the opening section of the story, Sophia is depicted as being a strong, independent, and highly industrious individual who achieves greatness through discipline and rationality. By the end of the story, Sophia appears to gradually relinquish control over her fate. On her lengthy journey by train to Stockholm, she is approached by a stranger who insists that she not stop over in Copenhagen for fear of contracting smallpox. Just as she is about to descend from the train onto the platform, he offers her a pill: “He placed in her palm a small tablet, saying, ‘This will give you a little rest if you find the journey tedious’” (Munro 289). She drops the pill into her pocket, where it remains all but forgotten for several pages of text. Descriptions indicating her rapidly deteriorating health are scattered throughout the following sections of text, such as “She began to cough. She was trying to cough something out of her chest. The pain, out of her chest.
The pain and tightness out of her throat” (Munro 297). The conductor informs her that there is no smallpox epidemic in Copenhagen. By this point Sophia has essentially lost her ability to speak as her health continues to decline.

Eventually, when she boards the second train, she at last remembers the unidentified pill in her pocket and chooses to take it, despite her hitherto limited experience of the effects of any form of drug, which Munro makes a point of describing, along with her inability to compare the effects of the tablet with anything she has experienced before. Her perceptions at this point are clearly fogged, and her thoughts seem scattered and do not resemble her hitherto rational observations of the world around her:

At first it might have been just relief, a grand though silly sense of being favoured, because she had managed to carry her bags and run up the steps and reach her train….

But there is more, as if her heart could go on expanding, regaining its normal condition, and continuing after that to grow lighter and fresher and puff things almost humorously out of her way. Even the epidemic in Copenhagen could now become something like a plague in a ballad, part of an old story. As her own life could be, its bumps and sorrows turning into illusions. (Munro 298)

All of these episodes illustrate Sophia’s gradual loss of her grip on her own fate. She has descended from rational thought and active manipulation of the world around her to a far more passive and uncontrolled state of being. The reader therefore experiences a sense of loss of control on Sophia’s part, as she rapidly declines into disorder and eventually death.

As mentioned earlier, a possible turning point of the story is the scene in which Sophia leaves Weierstrass thinking she will never see him again. We are unable to determine whether or
not Sophia is herself aware of whether her own end is approaching, or if her thought is directed at Weierstrass. This kind of suspense and calculated uncertainty that Munro creates is typical of her work, and in fact is similar to a method employed by epic poets. A common convention of epic poetry is the use of ‘retardation’: a technique that uses prolepsis, whereby an event is anticipated (by a character, by the narrator, by the reader), but the presentation of the actual occurrence is delayed (Jong in Morris and Powell 320-1). The duration of retardation may be confined to the boundaries of the narrative, or, in some cases, can actually be delayed beyond the scope of the poem. Retardation is a technique that seeks to deliberately exasperate the reader’s expectations and anticipation, which have been built up by the stylistic conventions and patterns typical of epic poetry.

In some cases, the foreseeing of future events (for example, the death of a character) is made available only to the reader; other times, the characters in the narrative, perhaps even including the individual whose fate is involved, are made aware of what is to come as well. In fact, it is to this acceptance of fate that Jong attributes the creation of the overwhelming sense of pathos and tragedy experienced by the reader, as heroes march toward their deaths fully aware of what is to come (Jong in Morris and Powell 320). In the case of Sophia Kovalesky, Munro does not provide any conclusive indication of whether or not Sophia is consciously aware that her end is near. However, the subject of legacy, of mortality and impermanence, and their great Romantic counterparts, immortality and permanence, is given much poignancy: ‘‘And after all,’ she said to Jules, ‘after all you do have the prize and will have it forever.’ Jules agreed, adding that his own name would shine when Weierstrass would be forgotten. Every one of us will be forgotten, Sophia thought but did not say, because of the tender sensibilities of men – particularly of a young man – on this point” (Munro 259). Such passages indicate that Sophia
and other characters mentioned previously and most definitely their creator all possess a strong preoccupation with the subject of their own and others’ destinies.

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Although the epyllion form, like most short narratives, has made a definite transition in its ultimate goal – no longer intended to bring about religious or moral edification but now as a form of entertainment – its core character and structure have remained relatively unchanged even in the present day. The Novelle utilizes many of the same techniques and considerations of style and structure as its ancient counterpart: it has necessarily altered our perception and representation of the ancient world by re-approaching and re-imagining the old heroic stories in a way that resonates with a more modern readership. Practitioners of the Novelle ultimately execute this goal by striking a balance between preserving the conventions of the past while re-contextualizing it in a way that establishes relevance to the present. Subtle shifts, such as the gradual transition from poetry to highly pointed and focused prose, have been made in order to maintain the interest and the support of a broad readership, allowing the smooth and effortless transcendence of the form through history.

The novel has, until recent times, been regarded as a far more esteemed prose form than the Novelle. Nonetheless, an increasing number of writers, such as Alice Munro, have diverted the public’s attention away from the novel and instead have redefined the Novelle as a form able to challenge its lengthier counterpart. In doing so, they have effectively begun the process of reshaping the image of modern prose fiction, by composing briefer narratives that, like short poetry such as epyllia, rely on highly distilled language and layering of meaning to produce, paradoxically, stories that are inherently expansive in scope. By re-engineering the epyllion,
writers of *Novellen* have continued, and will continue, to ensure the perpetuity of the ancient form.
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