Virginia Woolf’s Definition of the Short Story

Woolf’s essays about the short story

Virginia Woolf’s essays are written, like most essays of her time, in a style both polemical and metaphorical, extremely different from the cut-and-dried scientific style most literary critics and theoreticians adopt today.¹ Yet such a style should not blind us to Woolf’s aim and competence. In some of these essays, such as “Is Fiction an Art?”, she laments the lack of all theory of fiction:

For possibly, if fiction is, as we suggest, in difficulties, it may be because nobody grasps her firmly and defines her severely. She has had no rules drawn up for her. And though rules may be wrong, and must be broken, they have this advantage—they confer dignity and order upon their subject; they admit her to a place in civilised society. (Essays IV: 460)

And in “On Re-Reading Novels”, she opposes fiction to drama which has found its own theory:

The drama, however, is hundreds of years in advance of the novel....But so far we have swallowed our fiction with our eyes shut. We have not named and therefore presumably recognized the simplest of devices by which every novel has come into being.²

I would like to show that in her essays, Woolf goes on elaborating her own “theory” of fiction and particularly, a “theory” of the short story.
No definition of the genre is stated explicitly in any particular essay and if we browse through the index of McNeillie’s edition of Woolf’s essays, we find that none of them is devoted to this topic even if several mention specific short stories. What I mean to show, in the wake of Nena Skrbic stimulating insights into Woolf’s comments on the genre in her essays, reviews and correspondence, is that Woolf’s definition of the short story is present but disseminated in her essays and is there for the reader to reconstruct. Like Woolf’s common reader, he must “create for himself, out of whatever odds and ends he can come by, some kind of whole—... a theory of the art of writing” (Essays IV: 19), or more exactly, a “theory” of the short story. While occasionally referring to various other essays, I will base my present study on three essays mainly: “An Essay in Criticism”, published in 1927, “The Russian Point of View”, published in 1925 and “On Re-Reading Novels”, published in 1922. In the first essay, Woolf deals with Ernest Hemingway’s short stories *Men without Women* (1927); in the second, Chekhov’s short stories mainly are analysed and the last one focuses on Gustave Flaubert’s “Un Cœur simple”. Many of the remarks she makes concern fiction as a whole and novels in particular as the title of the third essay, “On Re-Reading Novels”, points out, but the various statements she makes on the short stories of the writers mentioned above, if put together and examined closely, constitute a coherent and stimulating definition of the short story. From essay to essay, Woolf keeps asking the same type of question: why do I like Chekhov better than Hemingway? Why do I like Flaubert’s story? These lead her to define her conception of the short story albeit in a diffuse way, through answers disseminated in the essays. If we are patient enough and if we listen to her call for a less indolent, more receptive reader who should turn into a critic, we can trace the outline of Woolf’s “theory” of the short story. Although Woolf uses this word herself in “The Common Reader” (1925), we should keep in mind that she resists all form of system threatening to enclose and stifle thought. What we find in the essays mentioned above are Woolf’s own reflections about other short story writers. Whether she praises or criticises them, what comes out in-between the lines is the pattern of the short story as Woolf herself conceives it, in a way the ideal pattern for her own short stories. This pattern is what she had in mind in the 1920s and if we can assume that it is what Woolf aims at in her own texts, we can also surmise that Woolf’s ideal may have changed from the beginning to the end of her