
What is a Short Story?

Objectives:

- To trace the history and development of the short story
- To become acquainted with the component parts of a short story

History

Like jazz music, the short story is generally considered an indigenous American art form. Edgar Allan Poe is most often credited with its creation, and although some argue that the short form was first practiced in France, Poe's refinement of it, and his establishment of rules to govern its writing, strongly support the position that the United States is the short story's natural home.

This is not to say that short stories as we know them today honor Poe's rules. In fact, Poe the literary critic would likely savage the work of today's short story masters because the form has evolved in the very direction he would find most disagreeable.

To Poe, the short story was the finest possible prose work, avoiding what he saw as the vulgar excesses of the novel and achieving more the effect of a poem (poetry being the true literary art, by Poe's reckoning). The intent of the short story, Poe decreed, should be the achievement of a single effect. Readers of his stories can appreciate the meaning of the word and, if asked, might state the effect most often produced as horror, or fright, or despair. Effect, for Poe, was visceral; he intended his stories to evoke an emotional response from their readers,

a feeling that would linger like the echo of a tolling bell. In pursuit of this effect, he sketched out two-dimensional characters and moved them like marionettes through macabre dances. His skills were such that he often achieved the effect he wanted, and the tales are indeed still effective now, when read by those who have been raised on a markedly different sort of short fiction. Likewise, Nathaniel Hawthorne, of whom Poe became an admirer, penned tales that still satisfy, despite a frequent lack of thematic subtlety, which might be expected to alienate readers more accustomed to the ambiguities characteristic of contemporary fiction.

Since the nineteenth century, which saw not only Poe and Hawthorne but also writers such as Henry James, Mark Twain, and Sarah Orne Jewett contributing to the national literature, there have of course been many celebrated writers of short stories. Any listing of American masters would include, for example, the names Ernest Hemingway, John Cheever, and Raymond Carver, and an even more recent roster must boast, among others, Alice Walker and Andre Dubus. But what separates many of these writers, and most particularly those of the twentieth

century, from the man who first laid down the rules of the short story is a fundamental difference in narrative focus; whereas Poe was concerned above all with striking a particular visceral note, modern and contemporary short story writers have turned their attentions most decidedly to matters of character. The short story today is primarily (there are exceptions, to be sure) concerned with exploring the inner lives of fictional people, people given far greater depth than any in Poe's work. The story now is about character. Readers come away from their reading feeling that they have met and have come to know someone, and contemporary stories seek to convey something of what it means to be human in our world through providing such introductions and intimacy. The narrator of Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" is a one-note madman, his story intended to communicate that single manic note; Luke Ripley, of Andre Dubus' "A Father's Story" (from *The Times Are Never So Bad*, 1983), confesses a crime of his own, but his story is richly layered with moral and emotional ambiguities, the very stuff of everyday life.

Length

The first question that must be addressed, of course, is simply this: what is a short story? A story is, essentially, a narrated account of events. Note that this definition imposes two specific requirements: narration and action. Each of these, in turn, suggests further requirements, among them a narrator and plot. Further requirements can be inferred from these, as well (the word narrator implies a human presence, which seems to suggest characters, and plot unfolds in scenes), but the point should be clear; the

definition is deceptively simple—the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

And then, of course, arises the question of length. What does the word short mean, exactly, in terms of a story?

"Exactly" doesn't apply. Short stories published in magazines and short story collections today generally do not exceed 10,000 words in length; fifteen to twenty typed, double-spaced pages might be the average. There are, however, publications that accept or even specialize in longer short works, but they are relatively few. If a piece of fiction runs upward of fifty or sixty pages, it might be labeled a "novella." "novelette" or "short

novel" rather than a short story, depending upon the definitions given those terms by individual editors. At the other end of the spectrum, of course, are extremely short works, again called by various names ("short short stories," for example). These can be a simple page in length (or less), and although their claim to story status is subject to debate, they are not hard to find because of the ease with which they can be made to fit a magazine's available space. (In the latter respect they are much like poetry, which could mean that Poe, himself, might experiment with these varieties if he were alive today).

Parts of the Whole

Characters: the people involved in the story. They are created through physical description, actions, speech, the opinions and responses of other characters, and, where narrative point of view allows, through their own thoughts

Setting: refers to the place(s) and time(s) in which the story's action occurs. Setting is created through sensory detail

Plot: the sequence of events which constitutes the story. Think of dominoes falling; each event occurs because of something that precedes it. Be aware, though, that plot is not always presented chronologically: flashbacks and flashforwards can be used for reasons of emphasis and clarification. And remember that plot is more important in a novel than in a short story. The short story tends to focus on one major event, while a novel might include many more.

Point of view: the camera angle from which the writer presents the story. In first-person point of view, *I* is used, and the narrator is typically a character involved in the story. In second-person (the least used point of view), *you* is used, in an effort to make the reader a character. In third-person, the narrator is a voice external to the story, using *he* or *she* in relating events. Point of view can be *limited* (allowing no access to characters' thoughts), *omniscient* (allowing access to all characters' thoughts) or *semiomniscient* (allowing access to the thoughts of selected characters)

Scenes: parts of the story in which the writer's attention is tightly focused on a particular point in the progression of events. Sensory detail is key so that readers feel that they see/hear/feel/taste/smell all that they would if actually witnessing the actions presented. (The type and amount of sensory detail can vary greatly)

Dialogue: the written approximation of speech

Theme: the insight or concern that the writer hopes to convey through the story. Not stated outright, it should be absorbed by the reader almost subconsciously

Drafting a Plan

The 4 Dramatic Throughlines

1. The main character succeeds
2. The main character is defeated
3. The main character abandons his/her goal
4. The main character's goal is undefined

The 6 Conflicts

1. Relational Conflict
2. Situational Conflict
3. Inner Conflict
4. Paranormal Conflict
5. Cosmic Conflict
6. Social Conflict

The 17 Genres

1. *Action*—fast paced and designed for pure audience escapism; primarily plot driven
2. *Adventure*—all about seeking something outside of ordinary experience that can be hazardous; filled with risk and the unknown
3. *Children*—same as adult books when it comes to genre; geared for a specific audience at a specific reading and comprehension level
4. *Comedy*—usually exaggerate situations, language, and characters for effect; must be willing to take risks as a writer
5. *Crime*—centered on characters that have done something wrong or are at least accused of doing so as the real criminal gets away
6. *Drama*—serious; portray realistic characters in realistic settings; can also exaggerate the seriousness of the problem and the character's reactions to those problems
7. *Fantasy*—transcend the bounds of human possibility and physical laws; magic, myth, and impossibilities abound
8. *Historical*—mixes detailed historical research with imagined characters
9. *Horror*—meant to frighten the audience; challenging common fears works best because everyone can relate to them
10. *Inspirational*—inspire readers into a new way of thinking, acting, or feeling; to teach the reader something positive about life
11. *Mystery*—a character needs to answer a question that solves something that is unknown; heavy on the rewriting stage (have to make sure clues are planted)
12. *Suspense/Thrillers*—contain intense excitement and anticipation; audience is left in the dark most of the time, figuring things out as the characters do
13. *Gothic*—stories of the macabre that invoke terror; feature terrifying experiences in ancient locations such as castles, crypts, and dungeons; tend to examine gender roles
14. *Political*—make a statement regarding social or political views or ways of being; primary focus of the work supports/critiques a social/political view
15. *Romance*—deal with love and affairs of the heart; characters are often passionate, with unfulfilled desires and dreams
16. *Science Fiction*—based on new or futuristic technological or biological advancements; inventions abound; has to be made believable or at least probable
17. *Western*—involve settings in the Wild West, with a feeling of the open range; have themes of honor, redemption, revenge, and finding one's identity or place in life

Building the Structure

1. Traditional
2. The Roller Coaster Ride
3. Fate
4. The Episodic
5. The Melodrama
6. Romance
7. The Journey

