

Chapter One:

Concept & Origin/Historical development of the Short story

1.1. The Concept of Short Story

A **short story** is a brief work of literature, usually written in narrative prose. The short story has grown to encompass a body of work so diverse as to defy easy characterization. At its most prototypical, the short story features a small cast of named characters, and focuses on a self-contained incident with the intent of evoking a "single effect" or mood. In so doing, short stories make use of plot, resonance, and other dynamic components to a far greater degree than is typical of an anecdote, yet to a far lesser degree than a novel. While the short story is largely distinct from the novel, authors of both generally draw from a common pool of literary techniques.

Short stories have no set length. In terms of word count there is no official demarcation between an anecdote, a short story, and a novel. Rather, the form's parameters are given by the rhetorical and practical context in which ,story may differ between genres, countries, eras, and commentators. Like the novel, the short story's predominant shape reflects the demands of the available markets for publication, and the evolution of the form seems closely tied to the evolution of the publishing industry and the submission guidelines of its constituent houses.

The short story has been considered both an apprenticeship form preceding more lengthy works, and a crafted form in its own right, collected together in books of similar length, price, and distribution as novels. Short story writers may define their works as part of the artistic and personal expression of the form. They may also attempt to resist categorization by genre and fixed form.

Determining what exactly separates a short story from longer fictional formats is problematic. A classic definition of a short story is that one should be able to read it in one sitting, a point most notably made. Interpreting this standard nowadays is problematic, since the expected length of "one sitting" may now be briefer than it was in another era. In contemporary usage, the term short story most often refers to a work of fiction no longer than 20,000 words and no shorter than

1,000, or 5 to 20 pages. Stories of fewer than 1,000 words are sometimes referred to as "short short stories", or "flash fiction."

1.2. Features of Short story

Short story is usually concerned with a single effect conveyed in only one or a few significant episodes or scenes. The form encourages economy of setting, concise narrative, and the omission of a complex plot; character is disclosed in action and dramatic encounter but is seldom fully developed. Despite its relatively limited scope, though, a short story is often judged by its ability to provide a "complete" or satisfying treatment of its characters and subject.

1.3.Origin/Historicaldevelopment of Short story

Before the 19th century the short story was not generally regarded as a distinct literary form. But although, in this sense, it may seem to be a uniquely modern genre, the fact is that short prose fiction is nearly as old as language itself. Throughout history humankind has enjoyed various types of brief narratives: jests, anecdotes, studied digressions, short allegorical romances, moralizing fairy tales, short myths, and abbreviated historical legends. None of these constitutes a short story as the 19th and 20th centuries have defined the term, but they do make up a large part of the milieu from which the modern short story emerged.

They date back to oral storytelling traditions which originally produced epics such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Oral narratives were often told in the form of rhyming or rhythmic verse, often including recurring sections or, in the case of Homer, *Homeric epithets*. Such stylistic devices often acted as mnemonics for easier recall, rendition and adaptation of the story. Short sections of verse might focus on individual narratives that could be told at one sitting. The overall arc of the tale would emerge only through the telling of multiple such sections.

Fables, succinct tales with an explicit "moral," were said by the Greek historian Herodotus to have been invented in the 6th century BCE by a Greek slave named Aesop, though other times and nationalities have also been given for him. These ancient fables are today known as *Aesop's Fables*.

The other ancient form of short story, the anecdote, was popular under the Roman Empire. Anecdotes functioned as a sort of parable, a brief realistic narrative that embodies a point. Many surviving Roman anecdotes were collected in the 13th or 14th century as the *Gesta Romanorum*. Anecdotes remained popular in Europe well into the 18th century, when the fictional anecdotal letters of Sir Roger de Coverley were published.

In Europe, the oral story-telling tradition began to develop into written stories in the early 14th century, most notably with Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Both of these books are composed of individual short stories (which range from farce or humorous anecdotes to well-crafted literary fictions) set within a larger narrative story (a frame story), although the frame-tale device was not adopted by all writers. At the end of the 16th century, some of the most popular short stories in Europe were the darkly tragic "novella" of Matteo Bandello (especially in their French translation).

The mid 17th century in France saw the development of a refined short novel, the "nouvelle", by such authors as Madame de Lafayette. In the 1690s, traditional fairy tales began to be published (one of the most famous collections was by Charles Perrault). The appearance of Antoine Galland's first modern translation of the *Thousand and One Nights* (or *Arabian Nights*) (from 1704; another translation appeared in 1710–12) would have an enormous influence on the 18th century European short stories of Voltaire, Diderot and others.

Decline of short fiction

The 17th and 18th centuries mark the temporary decline of short fiction. The causes of this phenomenon are many: the emergence of the novel; the failure of the Boccaccio tradition to produce in three centuries much more than variations or imitations of older, well-worn material; and a renaissance fascination with drama and poetry, the superior forms of classical antiquity. Another cause for the disappearance of major works of short fiction is suggested by the growing preference for journalistic sketches. The increasing awareness of other lands and the growing interest in social conditions (accommodated by a publication boom) produced a plethora of descriptive and biographical sketches. Although these journalistic elements later were incorporated in the fictional short story, for the time being fact held sway over the imagination.

Travel books, criminal biographies, social description, sermons, and essays occupied the market. Only occasionally did a serious story find its way into print, and then it was usually a production of an established writer like Voltaire or Addison.

Perhaps the decline is clearest in England, where the short story had its least secure foothold. It took little to obscure the faint tradition established in the 16th and 17th centuries by the popular jestbooks, by the *Palace of Pleasure* (an anthology of stories, mostly European), and by the few rough stories written by Englishmen (e.g., Barnabe Rich's *Farewell to Military Profession*, 1581).

During the Middle Ages, short fiction had become primarily an amusing and diverting medium. The Renaissance and Enlightenment, however, made different demands of the form. The awakening concern with secular issues called for a new attention to actual conditions. Simply, the diverting stories were no longer relevant or viable. At first only the journalists and pamphleteers responded to the new demand. Short fiction disappeared, in effect, because it did not respond. When it did shake off its escapist trappings in the 19th century, it reappeared as the "modern short story." This was a new stage in the evolution of short fiction, one in which the short form undertook a new seriousness and gained a new vitality and respect.

Emergence of the modern short story

The 19th century

The modern short story emerged almost simultaneously in Germany, the United States, France, and Russia. In Germany there had been relatively little difference between the stories of the late 18th century and those in the older tradition of Boccaccio. In 1795 Goethe contributed a set of stories to Schiller's journal, *Die Horen*, that were obviously created with the *Decameron* in mind. Significantly, Goethe did not call them "short stories" (*Novellen*) although the term was available to him. Rather, he thought of them as "entertainments" for German travellers (*UnterhaltungendeutscherAusgewanderten*). Friedrich Schlegel's early discussion of the short narrative form, appearing soon after Goethe's "entertainments," also focussed on Boccaccio (*Nachrichten von den poetischen Werken des G. Boccaccio*, 1801).

Perhaps sensitive to this qualification, Heinrich von Kleist and E.T.A. Hoffmann called their short works on fabulous themes “tales” (*Erzählungen*). Somewhat like Poe, Kleist created an expression of human problems, partly metaphysical and partly psychological, by dramatizing man’s confrontations with a fantastic, chaotic world. Hoffmann’s intriguing tales of exotic places and of supernatural phenomena were very likely his most influential. Another important writer, Ludwig Tieck, explicitly rejected realism as the definitive element in a short story. As he noted in his preface to the 1829 collection of his works and as he demonstrated in his stories, Tieck envisioned the short story as primarily a matter of intensity and ironic inversion. A story did not have to be realistic in any outward sense, he claimed, so long as the chain of consequences was “entirely in keeping with character and circumstances.” By allowing the writer to pursue an inner, and perhaps bizarre, reality and order, Tieck and the others kept the modern story open to non-journalistic techniques.

In the **United States**, the short story, as in Germany, evolved in two strains. On the one hand there appeared the realistic story that sought objectively to deal with seemingly real places, events, or persons. The regionalist stories of the second half of the 19th century (including those by G.W. Cable, Bret Harte, SarahOrne Jewett) are of this kind. On the other hand, there developed the impressionist story, a tale shaped and given meaning by the consciousness and psychological attitudes of the narrator. Predicated upon this element of subjectivity, these stories seem less objective and are less realistic in the outward sense. Of this sort are Poe’s tales in which the hallucinations of a central character or narrator provide the details and facts of the story. Like the narrators in “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843) and “The Imp of the Perverse” (1845), the narrator of “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) so distorts and transforms what he sees that the reader cannot hope to look objectively at the scene. Looking through an intermediary’s eyes, the reader can see only the narrator’s impressions of the scene.

Some writers contributed to the development of both types of story. Washington Irving wrote several realistic sketches (*The Sketch-Book*, 1819–20; *The Alhambra*, 1832) in which he carefully recorded appearances and actions. Irving also wrote stories in which the details were taken not from ostensible reality but from within a character’s mind. Much of the substance of “The Stout Gentleman” (1821), for example, is reshaped and recharged by the narrator’s fertile imagination; “Rip Van Winkle” (1819) draws upon the symbolic surreality of Rip’s dreams.

Several American writers, from Poe to James, were interested in the “impressionist” story that focuses on the impressions registered by events on the characters’ minds, rather than the objective reality of the events themselves. In Herman Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener” (1856), the narrator is a man who unintentionally reveals his own moral weaknesses through his telling of the story of Bartleby. Mark Twain’s tales of animals. Ambrose Bierce’s famous “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” (1891) is another example of this type of story in which the reader sees a mind at work—distorting, fabricating, and fantasizing—rather than an objective picture of actuality. In contrast, William Dean Howells usually sought an objectifying aesthetic distance. Though Howells was as interested in human psychology and behaviour as any of the impressionist writers, he did not want his details filtered through a biased, and thus distorting, narrator. Impressionism, he felt, gave license for falsifications; in the hands of many writers of his day, it did in fact result in sentimental romanticizing.

But in other hands the impressionist technique could subtly delineate human responses. Henry James was such a writer. Throughout his prefaces to the New York edition of his works, the use of an interpreting “central intelligence” is constantly emphasized. “Again and again, on review,” James observes, “the shorter things in especial that I have gathered into [the Edition] have ranged themselves not as my own impersonal account of the affair in hand, but as my account of somebody’s impression of it.” This use of a central intelligence, who is the “impersonal author’s concrete deputy or delegate” in the story, allows James all the advantages of impressionism and, simultaneously, the freedom and mobility common to stories narrated by a disembodied voice.

The new respect for the short story was also evident in **France**, as Henry James observed, when in 1844 Prosper Mérimée with his handful of little stories was appointed to the French Academy.” As illustrated by “Columbia” (1841) or “Carmen” (1845), which gained additional fame as an opera, Mérimée’s stories are masterpieces of detached and dry observation, though the subject matter itself is often emotionally charged. Nineteenth-century France produced short stories as various as 19th-century America—although the impressionist tale was generally less common in France. (It is as if, not having an outstanding impressionist storyteller themselves, the French adopted Poe, who was being ignored by the critics in his own country.) The two major French impressionist writers were Charles Nodier, who experimented with symbolic fantasies, and Gérard de Nerval, whose collection *Les Filles du feu* (1854; “Daughters of Fire”) grew out

of recollections of his childhood. Artists primarily known for their work in other forms also attempted the short story—novelists like Honoré de Balzac and Gustave Flaubert and poets like Alfred de Vigny and Théophile Gautier.

One of the most interesting writers of 19th-century France is Alphonse Daudet, whose stories reflect the spectrum of interest and techniques of the entire century. His earliest and most popular stories (*Lettres de monmoulin*, 1866; “Letters from My Mill”) create a romantic, picturesque fantasy; his stories of the Franco-Prussian War (*Contes du Lundi*, 1873; “Monday’s Tales”) are more objectively realistic, and the sociological concern of his last works betrays his increasing interest in naturalistic determinism.

During the first two decades of the 19th century in **Russia**, fable writing became a fad. By all accounts the most widely read fabulist was Ivan Krylov whose stories borrowed heavily from Aesop, La Fontaine, and various Germanic sources. If Krylov’s tales made short prose popular in Russia, the stories of the revered poet Aleksandr Pushkin gained serious attention for the form. Somewhat like Mérimée in France (who was one of the first to translate Pushkin, Gogol, and Turgenev into French), Pushkin cultivated a detached, rather classical style for his stories of emotional conflicts (*The Queen of Spades*, 1834). Also very popular and respected was Mikhail Lermontov’s “novel,” *A Hero of Our Time* (1840), which actually consists of five stories that are more or less related.

But it is Nikolay Gogol who stands at the headwaters of the Russian short story; Dostoyevsky noted that all Russian short story writers “emerged from Gogol’s overcoat,” a punning allusion to the master’s best known story. In a manner all his own, Gogol was developing impressionist techniques in Russia simultaneously with Poe in America. Gogol published his *Arabesques* (1835) five years before Poe collected some of his tales under a similar title. Like those of Poe, Gogol’s tales of hallucination, confusing reality and dream, are among his best stories (“Nevsky Prospect” and “Diary of a Madman,” both 1835). The single most influential story in the first half of the 19th century in Russia was undoubtedly Gogol’s “Overcoat” (1842). Blending elements of realism (natural details from the characters’ daily lives) with elements of fantasy (the central character returns as a ghost), Gogol’s story seems to anticipate both the impressionism of Dostoyevsky’s “Underground Man” and the realism of Tolstoy’s “Ivan Ilich.

The Russian master of the objective story was Anton Chekhov. No other storywriter so consistently as Chekhov turned out first-rate works. Though often compared to Maupassant, Chekhov is much less interested in constructing a well-plotted story; nothing much actually happens in Chekhov's stories, though much is revealed about his characters and the quality of their lives. While Maupassant focusses on event, Chekhov keeps his eye on character. Stories like "The Grasshopper" (1892), "The Darling" (1898), and "In the Ravine" (1900)—to name only three—all reveal Chekhov's perception, his compassion, and his subtle humour and irony. One critic says of Chekhov that he is no moralist—he simply says "you live badly, ladies and gentlemen," but his smile has the indulgence of a very wise man.

In the first half of the 20th century the appeal of the short story continued to grow. Literally hundreds of writers—including, as it seems, nearly every major dramatist, poet, and novelist—published thousands of excellent stories. William Faulkner suggested that writers often try their hand at poetry, find it too difficult, go on to the next most demanding form, the short story, fail at that, and only then settle for the novel. In the 20th century Germany, France, Russia, and the U.S. lost what had once appeared to be their exclusive domination of the form. Innovative and commanding writers emerged in countries that had previously exerted little influence on the genre: Sicily, for example, produced Luigi Pirandello; Czechoslovakia, Franz Kafka; Japan, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke; Argentina, Jorge Luis Borges. Literary journals with international circulation, such as Ford Madox Ford's *Transatlantic Review*, *Scribner's Magazine*, and Harriet Weaver's *Egoist*, provided a steady and prime exposure for young writers.

As the familiarity with it increased, the short story form itself became more varied and complex. The fundamental means of structuring a story underwent a significant change. The overwhelming or unique event that usually informed the 19th-century story fell out of favour with the storywriter of the early 20th century. He grew more interested in subtle actions and unspectacular events. Sherwood Anderson, one of the most influential U.S. writers of the early 20th century, observed that the common belief in his day was that stories had to be built around a plot, a notion that, in Anderson's opinion, appeared to poison all storytelling. His own aim was to achieve form, not plot, although form was more elusive and difficult. The record of the short story in the 20th century is dominated by this increased sensitivity to—and experimentation with—form. Although the popular writers of the century (like O. Henry in the U.S. and Paul

Morand in France) may have continued to structure stories according to plot, the greater artists turned elsewhere for structure, frequently eliciting the response from cursory readers that “nothing *happens* in these stories.” Narratives like Ernest Hemingway’s “A Clean Well-Lighted Place” may seem to have no structure at all, so little physical action develops; but stories of this kind are actually structured around a psychological, rather than physical, conflict.

In several of Hemingway’s stories (as in many by D.H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield, and others), physical action and event are unimportant except insofar as the actions reveal the psychological underpinnings of the story. Stories came to be structured, also, in accordance with an underlying archetypal model: the specific plot and characters are important insofar as they allude to a traditional plot or figure, or to patterns that have recurred with wide implications in the history of mankind. Katherine Anne Porter’s “Flowering Judas,” for example, echoes and ironically inverts the traditional Christian legend. Still other stories are formed by means of motif, usually a thematic repetition of an image or detail that represents the dominant idea of the story. “The Dead,” the final story in James Joyce’s *Dubliners*, builds from a casual mention of death and snow early in the story to a culminating paragraph that links them in a profound vision. Seldom, of course, is the specific structure of one story appropriate for a different story. Faulkner, for example, used the traditional pattern of the knightly quest (in an ironic way) for his story “Was,” but for “Barn Burning” he relied on a psychologically organic form to reveal the story of young SartySnopes.

No single form provided the 20th-century writer with the answer to structural problems. As the primary structuring agent, spectacular and suspenseful action was rather universally rejected around midcentury since motion pictures and television could present it much more vividly. As the periodicals that had supplied escapist stories to mass audiences declined, the short story became the favoured form of a smaller but intellectually more demanding readership. The Argentine Borges, for example, attracted an international following with his *Ficciones*, stories that involved the reader in dazzling displays of erudition and imagination, unlike anything previously encountered in the genre. Similarly, the American Donald Barthelme’s composition consisted of bits and pieces of, e.g., television commercials, political speeches, literary allusions, eavesdropped conversations, graphic symbols, dialogue from Hollywood movies—all interspersed with his own original prose in a manner that defied easy comprehension and yet

compelled the full attention of the reader. The short story also lent itself to the rhetoric of student protest in the 1960s and was found in a bewildering variety of mixed-media forms in the “underground” press that publicized this life style throughout the world. In his deep concern with such a fundamental matter as form, the 20th-century writer unwittingly affirmed the maturation and popularity of the genre; only a secure and valued (not to mention flexible) genre could withstand and, moreover, encourage such experimentation.