

Introduction to Short Story

A short story is a piece of prose fiction that typically can be read in one sitting and focuses on a self-contained incident or series of linked incidents, with the intent of evoking a "single effect" or mood.

A dictionary definition is "an invented prose narrative shorter than a novel usually dealing with a few characters and aiming at unity of effect and often concentrating on the creation of mood rather than plot."^[1]

The short story is a crafted form in its own right. Short stories make use of plot, resonance, and other dynamic components as in a novel, but typically to a lesser degree. While the short story is largely distinct from the novel or novella (a shorter novel), authors generally draw from a common pool of literary techniques.

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 formation.

Short stories have deep roots and the power of short fiction has been recognised in modern society for hundreds of years. The short form is, conceivably, more natural to us than longer forms. We are drawn to short stories as the well-told story, and as William Boyd, the award-winning British author and short story writer has said:

[short stories] seem to answer something very deep in our nature as if, for the duration of its telling, something special has been created, some essence of our experience extrapolated, some temporary sense has been made of our common, turbulent journey towards the grave and oblivion.^[2]

In terms of length, word count is typically anywhere from 1,000 to 4,000 for short stories, however some have 20,000 words and are still classed as short stories. Stories of fewer than 1,000 words are sometimes referred to as "short short stories", or "flash fiction"

Length[edit]

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 in Edgar Allan Poe's essay "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846).^[15]

Interpreting this standard nowadays is problematic, because the expected length of "one sitting" may now be briefer than it was in Poe's era.

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 a given story is produced and considered, so that what constitutes a short story may

differ between genres, countries, eras, and commentators.^[16] 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.^[17]

As a point of reference for the genre writer, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America define short story length in the Nebula Awards for science fiction submission guidelines as having a word count of fewer than 7,500 words.^[18]

Longer stories that cannot be called novels are sometimes considered "novellas" or novelettes and, like short stories, may be collected into the more marketable form of "collections", often containing previously unpublished stories. Sometimes, authors who do not have the time or money to write a novella or novel decide to write short stories instead, working out a deal with a popular website or magazine to publish them for profit.

History[edit]

The precursors of short story were legends, mythic tales, folk tales, fairy tales, fables and anecdotes which were present in various ancient communities across the world. These short pieces existed mostly in oral form and they were transmitted from one generation to another in oral form. A large number of such tales are found in ancient literature, from the Indian epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata to the Homeric epics the Iliad and the Odyssey. The 1001 Arabian Nights, compiled for the first time probably in the eighth century, is also a storehouse of Middle Eastern folk tales and fairy tales. Emerging in the 17th century from oral storytelling traditions and above-mentioned written works of the ancient times (which themselves are based on oral traditions), the short story has grown to encompass a body of work so diverse as to defy easy characterization.

With the rise of the realistic novel, the short story evolved in a parallel tradition, with some of its first distinctive examples in the tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann. The character of the form developed particularly with authors known for their short fiction, either by choice (they wrote nothing else) or by critical regard, which acknowledged the focus and craft required in the short form. An example is Jorge Luis Borges, who won American fame with "The Garden of Forking Paths", published in the August 1948 *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. Another example is O. Henry (author of "Gift of the Magi"), for whom the O. Henry Award is named. Other of his most popular, inventive and most often reprinted stories (among over 600) include: "The Ransom of Red Chief", "The Cop and the Anthem", "The Skylight Room", "After Twenty Years", *A Municipal Report*, *An Unfinished Story*, *A Lickpenny Lover*, *Mammon and the Archer* and *The Last Leaf*. American examples include: Jack London, Ambrose Bierce, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, John Cheever, and Raymond Carver. Science fiction short story with a special poetic touch was a genre

developed with great popular success by Ray Bradbury. The genre of the short story was often neglected until the second half of the 19th century.

The evolution of printing technologies and periodical editions were among the factors contributing to the increasing importance of short story publications. Pioneering role in founding the rules of the genre in the Western canon include, among others, Rudyard Kipling (United Kingdom), Anton Chekhov (Russia), Guy de Maupassant (France), Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera (Mexico) and Rubén Darío (Nicaragua).

An important theoretical example for storytelling analysis is provided by Walter Benjamin in his essay *The Storyteller* where he argues about the decline of storytelling art and the incommunicability of experiences in the modern world.^[19] Oscar Wilde's essay *The Decay of Lying* and Henry James's *The Art of Fiction* are also partly related to this subject.

Predecessors[edit]

Short stories date back to oral storytelling traditions which originally produced epics such as the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, 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.

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 India, there is a rich heritage of ancient folktales as well as compiled body of short fiction which shaped the sensibility of modern Indian short story. Some of the famous Sanskrit collection of legends, folktales, fairy tales and fables are Panchatantra, Hitopadesha and Kathasaritsagara. Jataka tales, originally written in Pali, is a compilation of tales concerning the previous births of Lord Gautama Buddha. The Frame story or frame narrative or story within a story is a narrative technique which probably originated in ancient Indian works such as Panchatantra.

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.