

## SHORT STORY: IS IT A DISTINCT FORM OF LITERATURE?

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### Abstract

*Though short story as a distinct form of literature seems to be a very recent phenomenon, in fact, it has been there for many centuries, entertaining the listeners irrespective of their age, language, gender and country. It is observed that in the history of entertainment telling and listening stories has always occupied an important place. During the initial period, these stories were orally handed down from one generation to the next. However, with the passing of time, the writers began to write down the stories. The interest of the writers and listeners in the short story has given it a distinct form with its peculiar characteristic features. That is why, this paper aims to explore various aspects of short story and find out if these aspects are similar or otherwise to the aspects of other literary forms like novel and drama.*

**Key Words:** *Short story, brevity, plot, character, setting, style, types.*

### Introduction:

Short story is one of the oldest and the most popular form of literature. While studying a short story, it is usually discussed with reference to novel. It is being read and enjoyed by all for several centuries. Actually, short story is a very popular form of literature both with the writers as well as readers in modern times. It is defined as ‘a brief

work of prose fiction'. It means short story is a brief work or the length of a short story is limited. Next feature of a short story is that it is written in prose. Last aspect of a short story is that it is a work of the creative imagination of the writer and so it is fictitious.

### **Short Story: It's History:**

A short story has been a source of pleasure for children and grownups, men and women and poor and rich. These stories are found to be present in one form or the other in all the countries. These ancient tales were based on adventurous life of some hero. In our own country we have tales in *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* narrating the adventures from the life of Rama and Krishna respectively. Similarly *Aesop's Fables* and *1001 Arabian Nights* contain many stories. In its entry of 'short story' *Encyclopedia Britannica* states that:

*"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."*  
(<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/541698/short-story>)

When we consider these traditional stories with the modern short story, we come across certain differences between them. Modern short story is primarily written as a work

of art and the short story writer gives more importance to the artistic presentation of truth than the moral in his story. His characters are the human beings and not the embodiments of virtues as is shown in the stories of *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. Modern short story is believed to have originated in America in the works of E.A. Poe. Soon it spread to various parts of the world. The main practitioners of short story are O’Henry, Maupassant, Balzac, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Galsworthy, Kipling, Rabindranath Tagore, and R.K. Narayan.

### Aspects of the Short Story

**1. Brevity:** Brevity is the most important aspect of short story. It is related with the length of the short story. Short stories have no set length. But the exact length of a short story cannot be easily determined. Some writers have written their stories in few lines only while others have written them in 40 – 50 pages. So far as the length of a short story is concerned,

#### J.A. Cuddon writes:

*“In terms of word count there is no official demarcation between an anecdote, a short story, and a novel. Rather, its 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.”*  
(1999: p. 864)

However, it is generally agreed upon that an ideal short story should not require more than half an hour to one hour to read it, that is an ideal short story is the one that can be completed within a single sitting. If the writer sticks to this principle then he can create the concentrated effect on the readers.

## 2. Subject Matter:

Subject matter or theme is an important aspect of a short story. It is said that:

*“The theme in a piece of fiction is its controlling idea or its central insight. It is the author’s underlying meaning or main idea that he is trying to convey. The theme may be the author’s thoughts about a topic or view of human nature. The title of the short story usually points to what the writer is saying and he may use various figures of speech to emphasize his theme, such as: symbol, allusion, simile, metaphor, hyperbole, or irony.”*  
(<http://hrsbstaff.ednet.ns.ca/engramja/elements.html#THEME>)

There is no any constraint on the writer to choose a subject for writing his short story. He can opt for any subject that he considers to be fit for his short story. He can write it on love, conflict, relationship, jealousy, honesty, etc. It can deal with the character, situation or some moral issue. By selecting any of these themes, the writer of a short story goes on developing his theme logically. He organizes all the events in such a way that it creates an impression of organic whole. But as the scope of the short story is limited, he has to put his theme in shortest number of words.

## 3. Function:

The function of short story, like any other form of literature, is to entertain the readers. It is the duty of the writer to create a specific effect on the minds of his readers. For this he pays close attention towards the fact that all the incidents, events, and the characters would help him to create the specific effect. The story should have only one centre of interest so that the reader’s attention is focused upon it and the expected effect is

created on him. Thus an ideal short story entertains the readers in the best possible manner.

### **Elements of the Short Story**

The main elements of a short story are:

1. **Plot:** Aristotle considers plot to be the most important element of tragedy. Same can be said with reference to short story. The plot of a short story is:

*“...how the author arranges events to develop his basic idea; it is the sequence of events in a story or play. The plot is a planned, logical series of events having a beginning, middle, and end. The short story usually has one plot so it can be read in one sitting.”*  
(<http://hrsbstaff.ednet.ns.ca/engramja/elements.html#PLOT>)

By arranging various events and incidents skillfully, the writer creates his plot as an organic whole. He arranges the events properly so that it may create desired effect on the readers. The plot should be logically developed with proper beginning, middle and an end. The plot may contain the elements of surprise, mystery and conflict so that it may hold the attention of the readers. Among these elements, conflict holds the centre place as:

*“...without conflict there is no plot. It is the opposition of forces which ties one incident to another and makes the plot move. Conflict is not merely limited to open arguments, rather it is any form of opposition that faces the main character. Within a short story there may be only one central struggle, or there may be one dominant struggle with many minor ones.”* (  
<http://hrsbstaff.ednet.ns.ca/engramja/elements.html#CONFLICT>)

Therefore a success of a short story largely depends on how the writer has constructed his plot. A good plot contains a proper introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement.

**2. Characters:** Characterization is another important element of a short story. But the canvas of a short story is very limited. So a short story writer cannot draw a full portrait of his character. He overcomes this limitation by concentrating on some single aspect of the personality of his characters. He embodies them with the essential flesh and blood so as to make them life like. These characters help the writer to hold the attention of the readers.

**3. Setting:** “The time and location in which a story takes place is called the setting.” (<http://hrsbstaff.ednet.ns.ca/engramja/elements.html#SETTING>) A short story writer sets his story in a specific time and place. It helps him to create the desired effect or to set specific tone or mood. If the writer wants his story to be tragic, the atmosphere must be gloomy.

Setting also includes the time period. The time sequence is very important to create the necessary effect. Some writers make use of chronological sequence. They go on narrating the events or the incidents in a proper chronological order. Some other writers, particularly the writers of psychological stories, make use of psychological time. These writers do not stick to the chronology of events. They go on narrating the events of their story as they come to the minds of their characters. The elements of setting include place, time, weather conditions, social conditions, mood or atmosphere.

**4. Style:** Style means the manner in which the writer writes his story. Every writer has his own style of writing. There are some writers who use a simple, straightforward style of writing whereas the others prefer to take various turns and twists in writing. The language is used to fulfill the specific purpose. To create the expected effect, some writers make use

of repetition. Certain words or phrases are repeated. The language is chosen to suit the social rank and position of the characters. Style is so important that it helps the writers to:

*“...make any subject interesting through the use of style. It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it. Unfortunately, style is about as easy to define as love, truth and beauty. Style also encompasses nearly every other aspect of writing, but can be boiled down into a few basic rules: avoid wordiness, be specific, use active verbs, avoid cliché, provide sensory description, and order events logically. Another very basic rule of style, nearly cliché in itself, is the admonition to show, don’t tell. Very important but somewhat tricky until you get the hang of it.” ([http://www.absolutewrite.com/specialty\\_writing/compelling\\_short.htm](http://www.absolutewrite.com/specialty_writing/compelling_short.htm))*

## **Types of Short Story**

The main types of short story are:

**1. The Social Story:** This is one important type of story. It:

*“...describes a situation, skill, or concept in terms of relevant social cues, perspectives, and common responses in a specifically defined style and format. The goal of a Social Story™ is to share accurate social information in a patient and reassuring manner that is easily understood by its audience. Half of all Social Stories™ developed should affirm something that an individual does well. Although the goal of a Story™ should never be to change the individual’s behavior, that individual’s improved understanding of events and expectations may lead to more effective responses.”*

This type of story presents some social problem. As is seen that there are some specific problems of every society, the writers choose these problems and write their stories on them. By presenting these problems in their stories, the writer seeks to find out some meaningful solution for them. The problems usually presented by these writers are related to equality, quality of education, law and order, and religious, racial and caste discrimination.

**2. The Love Story:** Such story deals with the theme of love. It appeals to the emotions and passions of the readers. Such a story usually follows the same pattern. The writer presents a brave and handsome young man and a beautiful young woman falling in love with each other. But the course of their love-life is usually full of obstacles. Finally all these obstacles are removed and the lovers are united in marriage. Actually, love is central to the human life and so this kind of story appeals to the hearts of the readers.

**3. The Detective Story:** This type of story presets some crime and its investigation. It is a:

*“...type of popular literature in which a crime is introduced and investigated and the culprit is revealed. The traditional elements of the detective story are: (1) the seemingly perfect crime; (2) the wrongly accused suspect at whom circumstantial evidence points; (3) the bungling of dim-witted police; (4) the greater powers of observation and superior mind of the detective; and (5) the startling and unexpected denouement, in which the detective reveals how the identity of the culprit was ascertained. Detective stories frequently operate on the principle that superficially convincing evidence is ultimately irrelevant. Usually it is also axiomatic that the clues from which a logical solution to the problem can be reached be fairly presented to the reader at exactly the same time that the sleuth receives them and that the sleuth deduces the solution to*

“the puzzle from a logical interpretation of these clues.”

(<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/159456/detective-story>)

A detective story begins with some crime and then the police are invited to find out the criminals. But the culprit keeps himself away from the hands of law. Then arrives the private detective and solves the mystery of the crime. From the beginning of the story an atmosphere of suspense is created to make the story interesting. Conan Doyle, Ronald Standish and Edgar Wallace are the famous writers of detective stories.

**4. The Scientific Story:** The scientific story depicts the facts of science in an imaginative manner. The writer’s imagination plays an important role in making this story interesting. In the modern world this kind of story has become very popular. H. G. Wells is a famous writer of scientific stories.

**5. The Adventure Story:** This story depicts the various adventures and misadventures of the life of the hero. There is a need to happen something constantly in such type of story:

“...There has to be action and conflict within the type of story. The author has to have the reader identify with a character in the story in order to draw them into the novel.”

(<http://www.edmondschools.net/Portals/0/docs/Writing%20Center/Genres1.pdf>)

Such stories are usually set in some dense and dark jungles, deserted islands, caves, haunted castles and forts. The hero of this story is entangled in horrible situations. But at the end, the hero escapes from all those risky situations and the story ends happily. Walter De La Mare and Rudyard Kipling are famous for writing such stories.

**6. The Psychological Story:** Psychological story writers are more interested in the psyche of their characters. They take us into the psyche of their characters. It enables us to know the inner workings of their minds and understand their intentions. We believe

in the actions and behaviour of these characters as we know why they are behaving like that. Katherine Mansfield, Henry James and R.R. Stevenson are the well-known psychological short story writers.

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