

Short story and it's elements essay sample

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



A short story is a kind of prose fiction which has grown up besides the novel and which has its own important and recognised place in literature. It may be defined as a prose narrative, " requiring from half an hour to one hour for its perusal." In other words, brevity is the key-note of a short story. It is a story which it is physically possible to read at one sitting. But its must not be supposed that the short story is a novel on a reduced scale. It has a definite technique of its own, and has its own requirements of matter and treatment.

Its Antiquity and Universality

Though immensely popular in modern times, the short story is not a modern product. It has been popular in every age and in every country. From times immemorial, people, old and young, have always liked to be entertained. The earliest forms of the short story were the tales of adventure, dealing with the deeds of valour or of chivalry of some popular hero. Every country has got its own legends and mythology, and tales from them or their modifications have been in wide circulation. Tales told in the Ramayana, the Mahabharat, the Buddhist Jatakas andPanchatantras, the Easop's Fables, the Arabian Nights and The Decameron testify to the popularity of the short story all over the world.

The Modern Short Story: A Work of Art

But these tales of adventure and moral tales of the past have no resemblance with the modern short story. Short story in the hands of the modern masters is a perfect work of art. As an artistic form, it has undergone a gradual evolution and has developed into a popular form of modern literature. The modern short-story writer is an artist, who is a close observer of life, a keen student of character, and a master of style. Every subject, between heaven and earth, is now regarded fit for the short story and it can

be told in any manner which may please the artist. The modern short story as a work of art originated in the second quarter of the 19th century in America. Its father was Edgar Allen Poe, who leapt into fame with the publication of his *An MS Found in a Bottle* in 1833. He holds his reader's attention with the skill of his narration and the atmosphere that he creates.

His influence on the modern short story writers cannot be over-estimated. From America the short story passed on to Europe and England. In Europe, Maupassant, Balzac, Anton Chekov, Leo Tolstoy etc., are its acknowledged masters. They are perhaps the greatest continental short story writers, standing alone in grace, wit and charm. Conan Doyle, Galsworthy, Kipling, H. G. Wells, Somerset Maugham, are a few of the many masters of this art in Great Britain. If we really want to appreciate the short story as a form of art, we must not limit ourselves to any one country but must try to study the great masters of this art in many countries. Its Essential Characteristics

The primary aim of a short story is to entertain. Hence a short story must be interesting above everything else. It may convey some moral lesson, it may ridicule human follies, but it must do all this in an interesting manner. It must absorb the reader and make him forget the worries of his life for the time being. If it does not do so, it cannot be regarded as a good short story in spite of all the other excellent qualities that it may have. A short story is a story that can be read at a single sitting. Hence brevity is another important characteristic of the short story. Absolute economy of means is to be used and everything superfluous is to be strictly avoided. There is to be no word

written of which the tendency direct or indirect is not to further the action of the story.

The art of the short-story writer is, therefore, a difficult one. It requires a long training and practice to master the art and become a successful short-story writer. Every subject between heaven and earth is fit for the short story, but it must be such as can be effectively developed within the short space prescribed for it. Whatever may be its subject, the story must leave us with the impression that even if nothing would have been lost at least nothing would have been gained by further elaboration. It must be complete without any suggestion of over-crowding. The attention must be focused throughout upon the single purpose of the story and everything not directly connected with that purpose must be rigorously excluded. Concentration on the aim or the motive of the story is essential for its success. Subject is not so important as the method of telling the story. As mentioned above, the short story must have only one aim or purpose. It must also have singleness of effect.

All the events, all the incidents, all the characters of the story must be invented to create that preconceived effect. The story must have one pivot of interest and by focusing the attention on that one point a powerful effect must be created on the reader. The satisfaction of the reader is the real test of its success. Owing to the exigencies of space a short-story writer cannot portray a character in full. He can only exhibit some one aspect or at the most a few salient features of a character. The searchlight is focussed on some important aspect of character and it is thrown into prominent relief.

Men and women are placed in such telling situations as are sufficient to develop the prominent traits of their characters. Here the novelist has an advantage over the short-story writer. He has ample space at his disposal, and so can place his character in as many situations as he likes and display different qualities of his characters. He can gradually develop the characters of his men and women and can lay their very souls bare before us. All this is not possible in a short story.

Besides, a short-story writer cannot introduce a dozen or even half-a-dozen characters in the story, as it would result in over-crowding. None of the characters would then be effectively developed. This drawback has given rise to the one-man story. The plot hinges on the actions of one man. All our attention is concentrated upon him and this results in a powerful impression and the story gains much in effect. As in the novel and the drama, in the short story also the dialogues occupy a very prominent place. They add to the interest of the story and make it charming and easy to read. On characterisation, the dialogue counts for much. Every word of it is made to tell. We know much about the character of an individual by what he says and by what others say about him. But the dialogues in a short story should be brief and to the point.

Long speeches would be out of place and would be considered a serious defect. A suitable atmosphere is necessary for a short story. The atmosphere may be one of tragic gloom, or of love and laughter or of suspense. But there should be consistency in the creation of this atmosphere. If for example, the story is a detective story, it must have the atmosphere of horror and mystery

throughout. In a tragic story, the atmosphere must be one of gloom and a humorous or comic atmosphere would be out of place. A short-story writer has limited space, so he must use extreme economy of words. Every word and sentence must take the action of the story a step further. Every superfluous word or sentence is considered a defect. Moreover, the language used should be easy and simple. Long and involved sentences are out of place in a good short story. Some Limitations

As the short story writer is handicapped by little space and little time, he has to concentrate his attention on a particular event or idea or a particular aspect of character. He can give us merely a slice of life. He has to aim to a single effect and has to unite closely together all such events which are best likely to produce that effect. Everything superfluous and unnecessary has to be skilfully sorted out. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency is not to further the effect sought to be produced. This singleness of aim, this directness of method and this brevity and concentration, result in a powerful impression. But it requires greater care and greater skill in all the details of composition, than is necessary for the novel. Any defects in the composition of the short story would stand out with greater clearness, than the same defects in the novel.

A short story requires a better artist than the novel, and is a higher literary form. But in another respect the novel is far superior to the short story. The short story cannot exhibit life in all its variety and complexity like the novel, for it needs a larger canvas, than is provided by the story. It cannot exhibit the gradual evolution of character, which is possible only for a novel. The

spiritual history of Levil in Anna Karnina, and the study of Tito Meleema's moral downfall in Romola would be impossible within the frame-work of the short story. In the story we meet men and women only for a few minutes and can know only one aspect of their character. The concentration of attention on one particular quality may result in a powerful impression, but the men and women who live long in our memory are the men and women of the novel. The Novel and the Short Story

Hence it becomes clear that the short story and the novel are two entirely different forms of literary art, each having its own rules of composition, its own usefulness and importance. Sometimes extravagant claims are put forward for the short story. It is claimed that the short story is the future form of fiction, and it would gradually replace the novel. However popular the short story may be, it is no likely to displace the novel for the very good reason, that it cannot do what the novel does. So long as people are interested in the variety and many sidedness of life, the novel is going to live as the representative type of modern literary art. Hence the short story must not be regarded as a rival to, or as a substitute for, the novel, but as a separate literary form which has grown side by side with the novel, and has come to occupy an important place in the literatures of the world. The Drama and the Short Story

The short story is closely related to the drama in brevity. Both the dramatist and the short story writher are handicapped by little space and little time. Drama, like the short story, is a most rigorous form of literary art. Both require a long preliminary discipline in technique. Extreme condensation,

extreme economy of words, is essential for both the drama and the short story. But while the dramatist is bound by the conditions of the stage and is everywhere hampered by those conditions, the short story writer has no such limitations. His complete immunity from the conditions of the stage, gives to the short story a freedom of movement, a breadth and a flexibility, which the drama can never attain. Another difference between the two is to be found in their methods of characterisation. Both, of course, emphasise some particular qualities of a man and thus bring them out into bold relief.

Searchlight is focused on some particular incident in a man's life, and some particular phase of his character is brilliantly illuminated. In the drama the character of the individual unfolds itself before us, as the action develops and scene follows scene. No such evolution of character is possible in the short story. Again in the drama the dialogue plays an important part in characterisation. The story is developed through dialogue, and every word of the dialogue is made to tell. The short-story writer does not suffer any such limitation. He may or may not introduce dialogue. He can, if he so likes, constitute himself the official interpreter of his men and women and tell us himself all that we need to know about them. He can dissect his characters, and lay bare before the readers their innermost souls. Thus we come to another great difference between the short-story and the drama.

The drama is objective or impersonal; the short story can be both subjective or objective as the writer thinks fit. The dramatist is compelled to stand apart. He cannot introduce his personality into the drama. He cannot mix freely with his men and women, lay their thoughts and feelings before us

and pass judgment upon them. On the other hand, the short story writer is at liberty to describe a scene, narrate events, exhibit character, preach a certain philosophy of life, and even acquaint the reader of his own personality. Modern Short-Story: Its Immense Popularity: Causes

It is now generally recognised that the short-story is one of the most popular, if not the most popular, form of literary composition. The immense popularity is the result of many co-operating causes. First, there is the hurry and bustle of modern life. The modern readers has no time or inclination to read the “ large still books” over which people liked to linger in the past, when life passed on in a leisurely fashion. He can no longer find time to read novels like Tom Jones, ‘ Amelia’ and others which required much patience and must be continued day after day. He wants something which he can read in a short time and at one sitting, whenever he finds time. The short story comes in handy for the purpose. It entertains him after a hard days work without wasting much of his precious time. Secondly, the spread of education and the enormous development of journalism are other factors which have contributed to its popularity. With the universal extension of education the demand for reading matter has increased.

It is obvious that all cannot read higher literature which is meant for deep meditative study and not for recreation. The public wants light works and this demand is satisfied by the short-story. A large number of magazines and journals which came into being simultaneously with the spread of education did much to increase the popularity of the short story. Long novels and dramas could not be published at one time. If they were published in serial

instalments, by missing a single issue the continuity broke, and the readers felt them to be unentertaining. Hence they published short stories, complete in one issue and providing the reader with the kind of entertainment he wanted. Hence it is true to say, as H. E. Bates has said "The evolution of the short story has something to do with the evolution of the general reader."

Types of Short Story: Its Immense Variety

Immense is the variety of the short story in the modern age. On the basis of their themes short stories may be roughly classified as follows: (1) The Love Story - Love is an essential ingredient of human life. The love story is generally liked by the readers, because there is an appeal to our emotions and our passions in a love story. The plot of the love story is generally the same. A man meets a woman. He is attracted to her enchanting and ravishing beauty. She is gradually attracted towards him. But the course of true love does not run smoothly. The lovers are opposed by their parents or social laws. There is a conflict. Ultimately, the opponents are forced to agree to their wishes and they are happily married. Sometimes there is a rival of the lover, the hero of the story.

If ultimately the villain or the rival is defeated and punished, and the hero marries the woman he loves, it is a comedy pure and simple. If, in the bitter clash, the hero is overcome and falls, the ending is tragic. With a little change in details, names and setting, nearly all love stories follow this pattern. (2) The Adventure Story - In the adventure story, there are heroic exploits and adventures of a risky nature. The stories of Kipling, Walter De La Mare etc., are adventure stories. These writers take us to impregnable

jungles, desert islands; invincible mountains, treasure hunts, queer birds, beasts, and thrilling discoveries at the bottom of the ocean and beyond the world of men. (3) The Detective Story - The detective story deals with crime and the unravelling of the crime. In detective stories some crime is committed, and the police pursues the criminals.

The criminals evade the police, but they cannot evade the penetrating eyes of the shrewd investigators, like Sherlock Holmes. The interest lies in the unravelling of the mystery, and the handling of the matter by the chief investigator of the crime. There is constant suspense and animation. The stories of Conan Doyle, Ronald Standish, Edgar Wallace, are detective stories. The heroes of the stories, say Sherlock Holmes in Conan Doyle's stories, succeed in tracing even the most crafty of the culprits. (4) The Psychological Story - Psychology is the study of the mental processes of the characters. It helps us to understand how, under certain circumstances and situations, a normal man will act. In psychological stories the interest is mainly on the motives of the chief characters, and the conflict through which they have to pass in their minds. The psychological story is mainly concerned with the soul of the hero. Its appeal is internal and not owing to the external circumstances.

The stories of Meredith, Stevenson, Katherine Mansfield are psychological in character. "Markheim" is one of the finest psychological stories of R. L. Stevenson. (5) The Scientific Story or Scientific Fantasy - The scientific story deals with the facts of science in an interesting, imaginative manner. The subject matter of the story is provided by the varied branches of science, but

the treatment of the dull scientific matter is carried on imaginatively. The stories of H. G. Wells are highly scientific in character. He deals with the facts which are scientific by their very nature - but do not have yet a scientific basis of truth. Wells is the most important writer of scientific fantasies. (6) The Social Story - Short stories have been written on social problems.

There are a number of social problems which face every society, and stories are written on these subjects. The aim of the social story is to focus on the intricate social problems in an interesting manner. The stories of John Galsworthy are purely social stories. In them we find the conflict between society and the individual. The writer questions the validity of the prevailing customs and contentions of society. He discusses subjects like social equality, the distribution of wealth, and the righteousness of social laws etc. These social stories are very interesting and can serve the useful purpose of reforming the evils of our social life.