

The Short Story Now and Then

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Abstract

The modern short story is considered to be one of the oldest forms of the narrative in the world of literature; it is the natural heir of the oral tale. The short story started verbally - people meet and begin telling stories to each other. In the course of time along with the advancement and development of the world, the modern short story developed and assumed a form which is different from the old oral tale. Thus, it is the origin of the short story in the West and how it was developed throughout different phases is the prime concern of this paper. It will also give a comprehensive historical background based mainly on the chronological order.

An Overview of the Short Story

The short story is an important genre in fiction but usually misunderstood form of writing; therefore it is helpful to understand what a short story is and how it differs from non-fiction, such as the essay; as well as other forms of fiction, such as the novel. Ridout and Stuart (1968) share the idea that the short story has often been associated with the idea of oneness of impression. This impression is attained by developing a single incident in one locale, with a small group of characters and covering a single, relatively short span of time. However, they feel that such definition of the short story may not be always applicable to short story. They, therefore, add that the short story is prose writing rather than verse. Although the short story is neither verse nor poetry, it may have a rhythmic pattern. It has no fixed limits, but the short story generally is fictitious prose not exceeding ten thousand words.

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A story running to about thirty five thousand words may be referred to as a novella or novelette; anything in excess of that is referred to as a novel. Ibid (p. xv) conclude in their definition of the short story, as “a unified work in prose usually no longer than ten thousand words containing elements of fictitious - dealing in a dramatic manner with a character who is faced with a problem about which he must make a decision”. Fowler (N.D:171-2) defines the short fiction as “Probably the most ancient of all literary terms; the terms cover everything from the fable, folktale or fairy-story, to such sophisticated and highly developed structures as the German Novella, via the stories of the Decameron, and Cervantes’ exemplary tales. Like the epic, short fiction goes back in time far beyond the art of writing, and it was not until relatively recently in the history of literature that stories arose from anything but a common stock”.

It was only at the beginning of the nineteenth century that the short story, because of the requirement of magazines of ever widening circulation, came into its own and attracted great writers to practice it; like Pushkin, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James, Anton Chekhov, James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka and D.H. Lawrence, as well as Maupassant who excelled in this particular genre. Ibid (: 174) makes reference to Poe’s definition as one of the earliest in two reviews 1842-1847 of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Tale “Short Prose narrative requiring from a half -hour to one or two hours in its perusal; working towards a single effect, created by incident chosen with economy and a rigorous sense of necessity”. Other critics, most of them in fact, are practitioners of the art, such as H.E. Bates, Sean O. Faolain and V.S. Pritchett have stressed that fact that short fiction must be exemplary and representative, a world in brief compass; that it establishes unity of impression and a feeling of totality, by concentrating on a single character, event or emotion, and by compression and avoidance of digression or a repetition, that it satisfies our craving for paradox and shape our longing to perceive a dramatic pattern and significance in experience. Bill (1987:51) expresses his admiration of the effect the short story yields:

“I like ambiguity and mystery, and the short story lends itself to that more tentative experience of life. The novel, by its very size, needs to include wisdom and overall vision. I prefer the vividness and the immediacy of the story, its ability to appear before the reader, be intensely alive for a brief moment, then return to darkness—and yet leave itself with the reader, lodge itself in his memory”

In another definition, Beachcroft (1968) also states that a short story may take only a few minutes to read. It may be written in unobtrusive prose - yet in those few minutes it may enter into the reader's mind. Iheakaram (1990:273) says "the short story deals with a single incident; the fruit of a single moment of time; a single perception, a single emotion, or a series of emotions called forth by a single situation". It has individuality, compression and completeness" He provides more elaboration when he states that It may range from the short story of five thousand words to the long story of twelve to fifteen thousand words. It is an imaginative narrative, unfolding a single predominating incident and a single chief character. It contains a plot, the details of which are so compressed, and the whole treatment organized as to produce a single impression.

The short story can be anything the author decides it shall be. A death of a horse could be regarded as a story as well as a young girl's affair. The whole thing lies on what appeals to the authors. Bates (1972:16-17) writes that "a story should be a story: a record of things happening, full of incident and accidents, swift movement, unexpected development leading through suspense to climax and satisfying denouement" On his part, O. Brien, to whom the short story in Britain and America owes an unpayable debt, holds that "the first text of a short, story, in any qualitative analysis, is the measure of how vitally compelling the writer makes his selected fact or incident. He continues to give more convincing explanations that "the first necessity of the short story, at the set out, is necessariness; the story, that is to say, must spring from an impression or perception pressing enough, acute enough, to have made the writer write".

All definitions have one thing in common, none of them has a satisfactory finality, and none defines the short story with an indisputable epigrammatic accuracy which will fit all short stories. So it is that the short story has come to mean all sort of things, situation, episode, characterization, or narrative in effective a vehicle for every man's talent.

It is also clear that there is one thing which many varied definitions all have in common. All omit to point out the advantages of elasticity, in both choice of character and use of time, which the short story holds over the novel.

Short Story vs Novel

The novel is predominantly an exploration of life, reflecting and describing in some form the impact, entanglement, fruition, destruction or fulfillment of human emotions and desires. Characters begin young, they grow old, they move from scene to scene, from place to place. These developments of characters, this forward movement of time, have always been and perhaps always will be the pulse and nerve of the novel. But in the short story time need not move, except by an infinitesimal fraction, the characters themselves need not move; they need not grow old; indeed there may be no characters at all. A novel without characters would be a tiresome affair, but a novel with characters who never spoke a word would surely be more tiresome still. Yet, a good short story has characters that never open their lips. A novel, whose characters were never named whose locations and time were never stated, might well impose on its readers a strain that they would justifiably refuse to bear. Yet many a short story has characters which bear no more marks of identification than the anonymous and universal of 'boy' or "girl", "man" or "woman"

Again, the short story remains elastic, and continues to increase its elasticity, as long as human natures remain infinitely plastic and variable. From these definitions and characterization, it is reasonable to consider the origins of that form of literature in the West.

Short Story, the West

Bates (1941) at the conclusion of the Modern Short Story, prophesizes that if the war then in progress produced nothing else in the world of literature it would certainly provide a rich crop of short stories. But his prophesy as to the probability of new golden age of the short story, such as that happened on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1920's and 1930s was, therefore, dismally unfulfilled. There were, of course, other factors militating against it, not the least of them being the economic situation. Even before the war in England, the little magazines to which writers of that generation contributed were already dead or dying. In America a magazine such as Colliers with a reputed circulation of some millions, was unable to survive; other notable names followed it. Everywhere, therefore, the market for stories dwindled.

To this pessimistic picture must be added the fact that the reading public, not only in Britain and America, but also on the continent, showed no disposition to revise its age-old prejudice against reading short stories in volume form.

The history of the short story through its different phases of myth and legend, fable and parable is not easy to be traced. On that score, Bates(1972:2) states that the father of the modern short story in all its manifestations of poetic realism is Nicola Vasilievitch GoGol who was born at Sorochintsky, in Russia, in 1809; in exactly the same year Edgar Allen Poe was born in Baltimore . GoGol died in 1852, Poe in 1949. From these two short lives may be said to follow, the twin streams of the modern. GoGol marks the beginning for the wider application of visual writing."

E.J. O'Brien, well-known as the editor of the best short stories of the year on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1920s and 1930, conceives the short story not as a new but as an ancient and continuous art. The English short story is a modern literary form, although it can actually show a continuous development from King Alfred to the Present day. It reached one of its highest points in Chaucer's time and his successors. On the other hand, Beachcroft (1968:2) argues that the short stories that have survived in written form from the antique world are rare, and those that have been handed down by word of mouth, and recorded in later centuries. Such stories as we may find in the Gesta Romanorum of medieval times or in the collection of the Brother's Grimm, are full of magic, myth and wild forces. Very few of them, in fact, have much resemblance to modern art of the short story. "the modern short story, that is, the prose narrative of up to ten thousand words or so, seems so obvious a literary form that it is only reasonable to suppose that it must have existed for centuries, and that so many Chekhovs, Kiplings, Somerset Maughams and Salingers of the past have all been composing stories that give us brief, vivid pictures of the daily life".

Scholars of medieval literature believe that if we have got to look at the historical development of modern short story in English, as a part from the early moods and far-off echoes of Anglo Saxon, we must begin with Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. To expect a modern point of view in short story writing would be ridicule, for stories are directed towards moral advice. "The Canterbury Tales", give us a compendium of every kind of story that was coined in the 14th century, from the saintly to the obscene.

It is a wonderful presentation of the pilgrims at the Inn and on the road in the sense that Chekhov intended. To that end, Chaucer contributed generously to the blossoming of the short story in the West.

In the seventeenth century the attacks on the stage are apt to represent fiction as mere lies. But early in the eighteenth century, with the more stolid middle-class merchants appeared in short anecdotes in Defoe's *Journal*, the whole nation of fiction is moving towards truth seen in every day life. If we retrace these antecedents through the centuries we discover an interesting point. There are two different sources, two different forms from which the modern short story might have descended; the ancient spoken story and the acted mime. Many of the medieval stories have ancient origins. It is customary to trace the earliest history of the story to Jatakas, which came to Europe from the East, and can be described as a collection of stories emanating from the teaching of the Buddha. From this source came such famous stories as, 'The Goose that Laid the Golden Eggs', and many others that descended to medieval times as fables, parables etc. These ancient prototypes, in fact, came into existence as vehicles of religion and moral instruction. It is sometimes said both by priest and historian that the parables of Christ are most wonderful of all short stories. However, the very fact of their historical existence emphasizes that the short story is from the out set deeply involved with a religious mode of thinking. Medieval homilists had books full of anecdotes arranged alphabetically, so that they could look up any vice or virtue from accidie to zeal, and tell a story about it. Elizabethan century essayists were for ever insisting on the moral purpose of their anecdotes (ibid)

It is obvious that the idea that the short story ought to be nuggets of moral teaching that ought to have a moral motive is deeply rooted in history. Yes indeed, the short story is older by centuries than the beginning of American literature but the American short story is one of the most distinct and important modern branches of the form.

On this score, Grant (1965) states that the movements most deeply affecting the short story towards the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century are realism and naturalism. They are represented in the first instance, by Hamlin Garland, and in the other, by Steven Crane, Jack London and Sherwood Anderson.

Other writers could have been selected to illustrate this particular phases in the development of the short story: Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and William Cather all wrote short stories, but their contribution in this field fell short of their excellence and importance as novelists. Several of the writers already mentioned were active after the First World War, but the period since then has been dominated by those who first began to publish in the nineteenth — twentieth or early thirties. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemrningway, John Steinback, William Faulkner and Katherine Anne Porter.

On January 14, 1832, Edgar Allan Poe published in Philadelphia Saturday Courier a short story in which he utilized for the first time the techniques of single effect upon which the modern short story has been built. Wallace and Stenger (1957) assert that what began as an American invention has remained an American specialty: of all the practitioners of the short story in English, the greatest ones have been Americans with six exceptions. Kipling was an Indian colonial, Conrad a deracinated Pole, Joyce and O' connor Irishmen, Katherine Mansfield, a New Zealander, and D.H. Lawrence, Englishman. In the same year America has produced not only Poe and Hawthorne who together created the short story as a form, but Henry James, Stephen Crane William F., Katherine Ann Porter and others.

Bill (1987) claims that some observers have attempted to link the short story vogue with minimalism, which emerged during 1980s as an ascendant of literary style in the United States. Minimalism has been described as pared-down writing about pared-down lives. Its 20th century progenitor is Hemmingway; its best known contemporary master is Raymond Carven.

Furthermore, other contributions to the theory and practice of the short story were the local colour movement that dominated American fiction from the Civil war to the near turn of the century. Brete Harte, popularized the short story and gave it sanction as a distinct form. However, a considerable light has been thrown on the use of the short story; this has been well-illuminated by Hadfield (1964) who describes the short story as one of the oldest forms of literature - perhaps the oldest of all, it probably originated around primitive camp fires, when hunters described, with unconscious art and imaginative emphasis, their deeds of the day. It found more formal expression in the classical fables and in some of the tales of the Old Testament and Apocrypha.

In the middle ages, it flowered in many different patterns later; the renaissance gave birth to the novella, which is simplified by the Decameron of Boccaccio. From this model came the French Conte and such collection of stories in English as William Painter's "The Palace of Pleasure".

The sudden emergence of the short story is attributable to the development of fiction in general. The vast expansion of the reading public and the rise of the circulating library have caused minds and so more pens to grapple with the techniques of the novel. A close look at the eighteenth century shows that the short story was not a famous form of writing, and with the advent of the nineteenth century it was labelled as an abbreviated novel. At the end of the nineteenth century, writers began to realize that the short story created problems of story - telling and composition that were quite different compared to that of the novel.

In its various stages of development, the short story has frequently been compared with some other literary forms, sometimes with some artistic forms outside literature. It is thus declared to have affinities with drama; with narrative ballad; with the lyric and the sonnet. It has also shown itself to be pictorial rather dramatic, to be more closely allied to painting and cinema than to stage. It is thus distinct from the novel. 'The short story in its use of action is near to drama than to the novel... They have affinities neither sponsored by a tradition; both are, accordingly free, both; still are self conscious, show self-imposed discipline and regard for form (Bates, 1972)

The Palace of Pleasure by William Painter was first published in 1566, thirty years before Romeo and Juliet was produced, and forty years before the Duchess of Malfi. However, it is regarded as the most famous store-house of stories of the whole Elizabethan period. After the restoration a less voluminous form of fiction began to appear. At first mainly translated in French, this was the story of gallantry and intrigue, often pretending to be a revelation of scandalous goings - on among the gentry and nobility.

Coming the more contemporary times, the social historical circumstances of Europe and the Americans began to exert pressures on the form of the short story. This situation is well-pictured by Hadfield (1964) when refers to the beginning of the twentieth century that witnessed commercial opportunity and new development of fictional techniques; both had conspired to give exceptional encouragement to the short story writers in the twentieth century. Other factors accumulated to facilitate the growth of the short story are English-speaking countries. English writers have been influenced by stories of Guy de Maupassant more than French - another stimulus to English story writers the emergence of Russian literature represented by Tchekov, this besides the gradual decline in public appreciation of poetry. Many prospective poets found themselves without an audience, the short story then became an alternative medium for them.

On the technical advancement in the short story, it has been circulated that Edgar Allan Poe was who brought the short story to a point of technical perfection which has never been surpassed. It claimed to have 1,500,000 adherents in America alone, exactly ten years after Poe's death. The vast forces of age-old superstition set crumbling by the touch of education, a public inexhaustibly hungry for melodrama and the supernatural, a sudden increase in those who could read and write - all these factors mingled not forgetting the melodramatic spread of a religion that captured and held its adherents by fear and the exploitation of both the glamour and the terror of the unknown, made the age completely ready for the spread of Poe's influence.

As it was eclipsed by drama, the short story was later eclipsed, in the eighteenth century, by the rise of the novel. But towards the end of that century, often to the detriment of the short story, they were to develop side by side. A general summing up of the emergence of the modern short story is well- worth quoting here: Our short story is sharply marked off from the other form. To be sure, it reveals itself as merely a special case, and particular development of the endless succession of distinctively short narratives, which since the world began, have dealt with those life - units that were simple, brief, and complete in their brevity. But it differs from them in degree if not in kind., the influence of the Russian and French short story writers came late to England, where the form of the short story was molded by the strong hand of Kipling. While the influence of Kipling was at its height, two world famous novelists, Joseph Conrad and Henry James, were also bringing their weight to bear on short stories. (Beachcroft, 1968:121)

The nineteenth century development of the short story like most development in art was the result not of a single influence but of the clash of several influences, such as music and painting. So with Poe whose influence not that of Gogol, Tolstoy, Turgenev and Flaubert, not in the street of Baltimore but on the banks of the Seine.

True, the French who always interested in precise forms of any art naturally welcomed the new development of the short story with open arms. Balzac, Merimee, and Gautier are all roughly contemporaries of Poe, but it was not until the influence of Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Flaubert began to be felt in the saloons of Paris that the short story was to move forward and revitalize.

The spread of the short story from the United States to France is denied because Balzac in the eighteenth - thirties was writing prodigiously and by 1846, that is before Poe died, Turgenev had produced a series of what are, in spite of all their poetry, terrible pictures of the conditions of Russian serfdom. But perhaps, the greatest of all literary influences on this short story in the years following the Second World War has been the tremendous prestige of Somerset Maugham both in his practice and in his critical options. The conditions under which the short story could begin to thrive best, free from the poking of moral umbrella, and class-bound writers, did not begin to exist in England until the ninties. Even in America one can see that Brete Harte who was born in 1839 was to bring a touch of poetic realism to his excellent stories of the West, so no one in England for many years had done anything at all comparable with the short story.

Beachcroft (1968) thinks that in the development of the short story after Poe (1809), the ten year recurrence of the major names is almost monotonous: Herman Melville (1819), Fitz-James O. Brien (1928), Brete Hart (1819), Ambrose Burce (1862), Sara Orne Jewette (1849), Mary E. Wilkin (1862), O. Herry (1867), Jack London (1976), Stephen Crane (1971), these writers inherited something from one another. In the nineteenth century the short story took a series of halting steps forward. In Europe, on the other hand, culture rose readily and naturally to the top of artistic life. It did, in fact, produce several, but from many distinguished names, two stand out as the pillars of the entire structure of the modern short story: Guy de Maupassant, born in 1850, and, Anton Pavilovitch Tchekov. In Russia, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Gorky, Dostoevsky, Garshim, Andre- Jeve, Korolenko; and in France, Flaubert, Coopee, Daudet, Anatole France, all actively contributed to the short story form.

These names unsupported by Tchekov and Maupassant, make their period one of the richest in the history of the development of the short story. It has been reported that no single writer in England made a contribution comparable in weight and artistry to that of Tolstoy.

From the nineties onwards the most important influence on the English short story is to be the contribution of a woman. It is true that without the touches of Constance Garnett in translating Turgenev, Tolstoy, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Gorky, and Tchekov, the history of the twentieth century literature, notably that of the short story and drama, must inevitably have been a very different thing. Katherine Mansfield and A.E. Coppard succeeded more than any other writers of their day in assisting the English short story to a state of adult emancipation. They both attempted to bring to the short story some of the fancy, delicacy, shape and colour.

After the war, in the years of immediate bewilderment, Sherwood Anderson who was influenced by Hemingway's style in breaking up every known style started writing stories which broke free from the old tradition. Until the period after the first World War these influences as far as the short story was concerned, came mainly from France and Russia, but in the nineteenth and twentieth, the wind began to make itself felt from America and in a lesser degree from Ireland. In the immediate post-war years in Britain, the prominent figures of the English short story were Kipling, H. G. Wells, O Henry, Maugham, Goldsworthy, and Conrad. Until the arrival of Coppard and Katherine Mansfield no English writer, with the exception of Kipling, had made a reputation almost solely as a writer of stories. A third group comprises of Aldous Huxley, Virginia Woolf, Joyce and D.H Lawrence. He concludes that the backbone of the English short story is formed indeed largely by the generation born roughly between 1900-1910. To that decade belong V.S. Pritchett, L.A.G. Strong Mulchi Whitaker, H.A. Manhood, Leslier Halward, Arthur Calder Marshal, Pauline Smith, James Hanely, Elizabeth Bowen, G.F. Green, Geraint Goodwin, Beachcroft and Dorothy Edward.

Western Narrative Techniques

Generally speaking, the conventional, mainstream of short story tradition of the West rests firmly on the manipulation mostly of such devices as plot, tone, point of view, setting, dialogue and characterization.

The reader of novels and short stories structured on these devices is constantly aware of the manipulating hands of the author no matter how much he attempts to hide aesthetically. At the centre of every narrative is man but the social view of man is not uniform in all cultures. The west predominantly sees man as an individual being capable of charting a course of action within a social setting. The western narrative techniques being with claims which often run counter to group interest have fundamentally affected the art of characterization in the western narrative tradition.

Conclusion

Throughout its different stages, the short's track seems to be rather difficult to be traced. The short story developed from its conversational representation of the folktale in rural areas until it reaches the modernized stage; whereby it took different forms, style, and tone {working towards single effect, incidents chosen with economy, unity of expression, a feeling of totality and avoidance of digression or repetition, etc.}. This comes as a result of ever widening circulation of the magazines and other artistic forms outside literature. It is obvious that we come back again to the sensible conclusion that the short story, whether short or long, poetical or reported, plotted or sketched, concrete or cobweb, has an insistent and external fluidity that slips through the hands.

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