

## SHORT STORY:

### DEFINITIONS

“I am not...for those barefaced tales which carry their moral on the surface, staring one in the face; they are enough to deter the squeamish reader. On the contrary, I have often hid my moral from sight, and disguised it as much as possible by sweets and spices.”

Washington Irving  
Preface, *Tales of a Traveler* (1824)

“A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents, but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out, he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be not one word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction.”

Edgar Allan Poe  
Review of *Twice-Told Tales* (1842)  
by Nathaniel Hawthorne

[Poe contributed to the development of the modern short story with (1) effacement of the author; (2) evocation of sensation; (3) economy and unity; and, above all, (4) emphasis on a single effect.]

“In descriptions of Nature one ought to seize upon the little particulars, grouping them in such a way that, in reading, when you shut your eyes, you get a picture. For instance, you will get the full effect of a moonlight night if you write that on the mill-dam a little glowing star-point flashed from the neck of a broken bottle.” [Impressionism]

Anton Chekhov  
Letter to Alexander P. Chekhov (1886)  
*Letters 70-71*

“A short-story is a brief, 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 so organized, as to produce a single impression.”

J. Berg Esenwein  
*Writing the Short-Story*  
(Hinds, Noble and Eldredge 1909) 21-31

“A short story is a relatively brief fictional narrative in prose. It may range in length from the short-short story of 500 words up to the ‘long-short story’ of 12,000 to 15,000 words. It may be distinguished from the sketch and the tale in that it has a definite formal development, a firmness in construction. It finds its unity in many things other than plot--although it often finds it there--in effect, theme, character, tone, mood, and style. It may be distinguished from the novel in that it tends to reveal character *through* actions, the purpose of the story being accomplished when the reader comes to know what the true nature of a character is. The novel tends, on the other hand, to show character developing as a *result* of actions....However slight the short story may appear, it consists of more than a mere record of an incident or an anecdote. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end; it possesses at least the rudiments of plot.” [Italics added.]

C. Hugh Holman & William Harmon  
*A Handbook to Literature*, 6th edition  
(Macmillan 1936-1992)

“The story should have the valid central emotion and inner spontaneity of the lyric...It must have tautness and clearness....Poetic tautness and clarity are so essential to it that it may be said to stand at the edge of prose.”

Elizabeth Bowen  
*Collected Impressions* (1950)

“Every short story is a drama, but every writer of short stories has his own idea of what is dramatic. A story moves towards a disclosure and that may be an event, a complete revelation of character, the close of a mood, the changing of an emotion, the clinching of an idea, the statement of a situation now completed.”

V. S. Pritchett

A *modern* short story (1) is a relatively short narrative in which (2) a single episode is completed; (3) the true author is effaced; (4) the story is more shown than told, increasing the illusion of real life; (5) tends to satisfy the classical unities of time, place and action; (6) and builds to an epitome or epiphany.

Michael Hollister (2015)

### BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SHORT STORY

“Egyptian papyri dating from 4,000 B.C. reveal how the sons of Cheops regaled their father with narrative. Some three hundred years before the birth of Christ, we had such Old Testament stories as those of Jonah and of Ruth. Christ spoke in parables. A hair-raising werewolf story is embedded in Petronius’s *Satyricon*. In the Middle Ages the impulse to storytelling manifested itself in fables and epics about beasts and in the medieval romance. In England, about 1250, some two hundred well-known tales were collected in the *Gesta Romanorum*. In the middle of the fourteenth century Boccaccio assembled the hundred tales in *The Decameron*. In the same century Chaucer wrote his framework collection, *The Canterbury Tales*.”

In the eighteenth century came the modern novel, growing out of the picaresque novel of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.... In the nineteenth century came Sir Walter Scott, Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Merimee and Balzac, Gautier and Musset, Maupassant, Chekhov, and E.T.A. Hoffman. With these writers the short story as a distinct genre came into being. Some of these writers consciously formulated the short story as an art form. This development flowered with such speed and force in America that the modern short story is often called an American art form...

In the middle of the nineteenth century, under the impulse of Poe’s persuasive statement in his 1842 review of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*, critics postulated a definite structure and technique for the short story. To this was added, around the end of the century, the tight ‘surprise-ending story’ of O. Henry, and the short story came to be thought of as corresponding to a formula, a pattern that was much repeated in the popular short story. After the turn of the century, however, the impact of Realism and Naturalism joined with the example of Chekhov’s slice of life stories to force open the formula, and such masters of the form as Somerset Maugham and Katherine Mansfield in England and Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and, most recently, Raymond Carver in America developed the short story to a dominant form of literary expression in the twentieth century.”

C. Hugh Holman  
*A Handbook to Literature*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition  
(ITT Bobbs-Merrill 1936-1985)

“What began as an American invention has remained an American specialty: Of all the practitioners of the short story in English, the greatest ones, with perhaps a half dozen exceptions in 125 years, have been Americans. Of the six exceptions, Kipling was an Indian colonial, Conrad a deracinated Pole, Joyce and O’Connor Irishmen, Katherine Mansfield a New Zealander, and only D. H. Lawrence a bona fide Englishman. In the same years, America has produced not only Poe and Hawthorne, who together created the short story as a form, but Henry James, Stephen Crane, Sherwood Anderson, Ring Lardner, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter, and two dozen less well known but greatly talented

writers, who have taken what Poe and Hawthorne bequeathed them and enriched and enlarged and subtilized and intensified it.

Partly because of this early start, partly because of the conditions of American diversity and the nature of American journalism, the general level of accomplishment in the short story is probably higher in America than anywhere in the world, and if we have a literary form that most expresses us as a people, it is this nervous, formal, concentrated, brief, and penetrating one of the short story.”

Wallace and Mary Stegner, eds.  
Introduction  
*Great American Short Stories* (Dell 1957)

*Great American Short Stories*

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See historical survey of the short story by Stegner  
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Michael Hollister (2020)