



INTRODUCTION TO THE FORM OF SHORT STORY

: UNIT STRUCTURE :

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall

- Understand the form of a short story
- Discuss the major **components** of a short story with its historical development

After completing the unit, you should be able to

- Define a short story
- Identify the major components while reading a short story
- Explain how the short story **evolved** over a period in history

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Literature can be broadly categorized into two: prose and poetry. The prose includes novels, essays, short stories, etc. Each culture has preserved and passed on its heritage through the medium of stories. Sometimes, the stories take form of a tale, legend, a myth or even fictional historical event. All of us are familiar with “fairy tales” or “bed time stories” that we used to listen to during our childhood and enjoyed them thoroughly. The characters from *Panchatantra*, *Aesop’s Tales*, *Jatakas* and *Arabian Nights* are so famous that each generation of kids **relishes** them. At times, it is difficult to separate fiction from the fact due to the juicy elements of the story. No matter what it is about, stories have been enjoyed by

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people from the times immemorial. Can you recall any story that you loved to listen to again and again in your childhood? Why did you like it so much? Just think and try to relate it to what you are going to learn today.

1.2 WHAT IS A SHORT STORY ?

A short story is an imaginary prose with a few characters and a single event. It is usually a short narrative fiction, which can be read by a single sitting. Such a definition clearly tells us that the length of a short story should be very short. Perhaps, that is why it is called a “Short” Story. However, it is not a **defining rule**. Many Russian and American short stories go beyond fifty pages. Another important aspect that we can **deduce** from the above definition is that it has a single event. It means it does not require too many characters because the very scope of the story cannot **accommodate** many of them. The short story writer aims at the single effect through the single event in the life of a character. Nonetheless, a short story can have a good description of places and characters so that the readers can imagine the event properly. Here, “imaginary prose” is a significant phrase because the incident in the story occurs somewhere in a fictional world which might look real but is not real. At times, the names and places can be real; however, a good story takes its readers to a fictional world through unusual things that can happen only there. For example, we can meet Cinderella or witness the race between the tortoise and a rabbit only in the world of stories. Lastly, it is expected that a short story needs to be completed by a single sitting because it allows very little time to get **engrossed** into the fictional world.

1.3 COMPONENTS OF A SHORT STORY

Each structure is made of small components. Likewise, when we closely look at the form of short story, we find various major components that play very significant roles in deciding whether the story appeals to the reader or not. These components include: 1) Character 2) Setting 3) Plot 4) Conflict 5) Theme and 6) Point of View. Let’s discuss each of them in detail:

1.3.1 Characters

A character is a person, an animal, or an object who/which participates in the action of the story. As we discussed, short stories have very few characters. A good short story makes a **life like** characters with which readers can easily relate themselves. Many a times, one of the characters tells the story as if all the events happened in his/her life or he/she has witnessed and partially took part in the events in the life of a major character. The main character is also called a **protagonist**. Let’s take examples of characters. In the story of Cinderella, the characters are Cinderella, her stepmother and stepsisters and the Prince Charming but Cinderella is the protagonist.

1.3.2 Setting

The time and place when the event of the story occurs is known as the setting. It is a very important component of a short story because description of a setting helps readers to visualize the story clearly. Usually, you must have heard stories beginning with the line “*Once upon a time in a village...*” which is the setting of those

stories. However, the short stories can also begin with very specific place and time. For instance, the famous short story of O. Henry called “*The Last Leaf*” begins like, “*In a little district west of Washington Square the streets have run crazy and broken themselves into small strips called places.*” The setting of the story makes the event of the story possible. For example, if the setting of a story is an on old and **abandoned** castle and the characters are moving at midnight, the readers are likely to expect some mysterious event. It is because we have heard many stories about what happens at such places when we go there at night.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:1

FILL IN THE BLANKS WITH THE CORRECT ANSWERS.

1. In ancient times, stories travelled in _____ form.
2. The short story writer targets at the _____ through the single event.
3. The main character is also called a _____.
4. Setting includes time and _____ of the story.
5. The author of the story *The Last Leaf* is _____.

1.3.3 Plot

A plot is a series of events that are linked together to make the main **conflict** work in the life of the characters. It is known as the foundation of the story because the characters and setting find a sequence or pattern of action in the plot. There are five basic elements of a plot:

- A. **Exposition or Introduction** wherein the story begins, the conflict and the main characters are introduced. (Cinderella living with a wicked stepmother.)
- B. **Rising Action** wherein the events start getting complicated and the readers feel excitement and tension. (She is treated very badly. She wants to go to the party at the palace but she is not allowed by her stepsisters.)
- C. **Climax** wherein the story takes an unusual turn, which is the moment of best emotion and interest. The readers keep rushing to see what will happen next. (The Fairy Godmother appears and helps Cinderella reach the palace where she dances with the prince. In hurry to return in a given time by the fairy, she forgets he glass shoe.)
- D. **Falling Action** wherein the story begins to **resolve** the conflict by showing the result of the action taken by the main character. (The prince is dying to marry the girl he danced with but could not find her. So he announced in the kingdom that any lady who can wear this shoe will be my wife. After everyone, Cinderella goes to try the shoe and she stakes out the fellow shoe from her pocket; the pair perfectly fitted her.)
- E. **Resolution or the Conclusion** wherein the story ends on a logical note, which could be happy, tragic or even open-, ended. (Finally, the prince was happy to find his lost princess back and both of them got married and lived happily thereafter.)

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1.3.4 Conflict

The conflict is the struggle for something. It could be a thing, person, place or a situation. Usually, the main character is at the center of the conflict. You may find the protagonist struggling against another character (villain), animals, **destiny**, natural forces (forest, ocean, river, mountain), social systems, over his /her own feelings, decisions, or habits. In Cinderella's story, the conflict is whether her miserable life condition will ever improve and will the prince find her again or not? All the good short stories make readers engage with the conflict very tightly. In fact, when you read a story and start thinking, 'what the character would do now?' you are feeling the struggle of the character.

1.3.5 Theme

The theme is the central idea or the main belief of the story. It is a kind of **implicit** message or big idea. Quite often, the theme is universal which means it crosses the boundaries of cultures and nations. For example, if you read Leo Tolstoy's short story *How Much Land Does a Man Need?* You will find that theme of the story is 'greed' which is a **universal** human emotion which can have bad consequences. Another example is *Cinderella*, the story revolves around kindness and forgiving wrongs of others. How do you find the theme in short story? Well, there is a simple question you need to ask to yourself after reading it: what is it all about? And what you find is 'theme' in simple language.

1.3.6 Point of View

The point of view in short story refers to the narrator's position. The short story writer can write stories by four ways; first person, second person and the third person limited and the third person **omniscient** narration. Thus, the writer's choice of narration will decide her/her opinion about everything about the story. It is like a camera angel of the writer.

1. In the first person point of view, the story is told by "I". (*The Raven* – Edgar Allan Poe)
2. In the second person point of view, the story is told to "you" as if you are there as a listener (*The Haunted Mind* – Nathaniel Hawthorne).
3. In the third person limited point of view, the story is about "he/she" and the narrator is outside the story watching everything and telling. (*The Gift of Magi* – O. Henry)
4. In the third person omniscient point of view, the story is about "he/she" but the narrator can also see and tell what is happening in the minds and hearts of the characters. (*How Much Land Does a Man Need?* – Leo Tolstoy)

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:2

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS IN BRIEF.

1. What is a theme ?
2. What are the basic elements of a plot ?
3. What are the types of point of view ?
4. What is the conflict in Cinderella's story ?

5. What does the short story writer do in the resolution ?

1.4 BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF SHORT STORIES

The earliest forms of short story were folk tales, fables, legends and myths across the communities of the world. These tales were mostly into oral form and they were passed on from one generation to the next in the same oral tradition. However, the beginning of a short story can be traced back to the invention of the printing press, which allowed written stories to spread. The industrial revolution brought free time in the households, which made reading of novel a popular mode of entertainment. It was known as a “pocket-theatre”. However, short and crisp entertainment of a novel was packed into the stories of the magazines.

After the moral phase of the tales, the form of short story gradually developed as an artistic **genre**. The modern short story, as an artistic prose developed in the second half of the 19th century in America. Edgar Allen Poe became famous with his collection named *An MS Found in a Battle* in 1833. The story moved to Europe from America and many greatest short story writers developed it further. These writers include Maupassant, Balzac, Anton Chekhov, Leo Tolstoy etc. Their stories are classic in terms of beauty, form and appeal. The Great Britain gave the world the short story masters such as Kipling, H.G. Wells, Galsworthy, Conan Doyle, Somerset Maugham to name a few.

As the widespread printing and publication activities flourished with education across the world, more and more readers were added to the fan club of short story. The journals published in America between 1885 and 1905 increased to 6000 providing all kinds of stories to the readers, which in turn encouraged the storywriters, write more and **diverse** stories. In the UK, an exclusive magazine of short stories named *STORY TELLER* was extremely popular. During the modernist period (1910-1945), the stories were mostly based on the issues of war, dialogue with one’s mind (known as the Stream of Consciousness Technique), concerns of science and technology. We also have Indian short stories as well from Tagore, Premchand, Sarat Chandra, etc. The Post-war period (1945-1970) made the writers revisit their classic masters such as Chekhov, Poe and James Joyce. It is the time when the **science-fiction** stories became popular. The short stories of post-modern period (1970-till today) experiment with symbols, plotlessness, **negation** of single truth and reality, and fragmented language. The period includes writers like Sandra Cisneros, Leslie Marmon Silko, Joyce Carol Oates and Lorrie Moore.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:3

FIND OUT WHETHER THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS ARE TRUE OR FALSE.

1. Edgar Allan Poe belonged to the Great Britain.
2. Folk tales came much before the artistic form of short story.
3. Stream of consciousness means talking to one’s mind.
4. The *STORY TELLER* magazine was published from India.
5. The post-modern short stories are experimental in nature.

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CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: 4

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS IN DETAIL.

1. Discuss components of a short story in detail.
2. Write brief historical background of short stories.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have learnt

- The definition and form of short story
- Major components of a short story
- Brief historical overview of the development of the form of short story

1.6 KEY WORDS

1. Components = Characteristics
2. Evolved = Developed over a period
3. Relish = Enjoy
4. Defining rule = A rule without which one cannot go further
5. Deduce = conclude/understand/derive
6. Accommodate = include
7. Engrossed = deeply involved
8. Life like = real life
9. Protagonist = the main character
10. Abandoned = not in use anymore
11. Conflict = struggle
12. Resolve = to end or solve something
13. Destiny = Fate or what is decided by God
14. Implicit = Hidden
15. Universal = Applicable to everyone in entire world
16. Omniscient = One who can see everything
17. Genre = Artistic form
18. Diverse = Various
19. Science-fiction = Stories dealing with imaginary scientific world
20. Negation = rejection

1.7 BOOKS SUGGESTED

- 1) William Boyd, *A Short History of the Short Story*
- 2) Florence Goyet, *The Classic Short Story: Theory of a Genre*
- 3) David Daiches *A Critical History of English Literature*

ANSWERS

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Check Your Progress 1

1. Oral
2. Single effect
3. Protagonist
4. Place
5. O. Henry

Check Your Progress 2

1. What is a theme?

Theme is the central idea of the story. It is the main message that the writer intends to convey.

2. What are the basic elements of a plot?

The basic elements of a plot include: 1) Exposition or Introduction, 2) Rising Action, 3) Climax, 4) Falling Action and 5) Resolution or Conclusion.

3. What are the types of point of view?

There are four types of point of view:

1. First person
2. Second person
3. Third person limited
4. Third person omniscient

4. What is the conflict in Cinderella's story?

The conflict in Cinderella's story is whether her miserable life condition will ever improve and will the prince find her again or not?

5. What does the short story writer do in the resolution?

In the resolution or conclusion, the short story writer ends the story logically, which could be happy, tragic or open-ended.

Check Your Progress 3

1. False
2. True
3. True
4. False
5. True