

# What is a Short-Story

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A definition is a dangerous thing. The more vital and growing and resilient a thing is, the more difficult to fence it about, to fix its limitations by statue. The short-story formed itself experimentally; it was not invented. Poe and Hawthorne were heirs of all that had gone before. So we may arrive at an understanding. So we may arrive at an understanding of the short-story form rather by observation than by definition.

Certain things, clearly, the short-story cannot be, and because these are most often the very things inexperienced writers produce and label as short-stories, we shall first inquire.

## I. WHAT A SHORT-STORY IS NOT

But here a word of caution. To deny that a certain sort of literary composition is a short-story is not to condemn it. It may be altogether of its kind . . . .

### 1. THE SHORT-STORY IS NOT A CONDENSED NOVEL

Several popular magazines today publish these novelettes monthly, which differ from novels only in their length, though both theme and method of handling are necessarily limited by the number of words permitted.

But if the true novelette were compressed yet more -- say within half its present compass--it would still be a condensed novel and not a long short-story. The real difference is in kind, not in length.

a) The short-story produces a singleness of effect denied to the novel. . . .

Growing out of this need for simplicity, for totality of effect, is this further demand upon the short-story:

(b) It must differ from the novel in scope and in structure.

Speaking broadly, the novel is expansive, the short-story intensive. The great novelists sought "the all-embracing view" of life, the short-story writer looks upon a special -- and often an exaggerated -- character, incident, or experience. The canvas on which the true novelist paints is broader, accommodating more characters, who stand out upon a larger and more varied background. . . .

The plot of a novel is often complicated by episodes and contributory sub-plots, whereas the short-story exploits a single predominating incident, to which the other incidents -- few, if any must be subordinate and directly contributory.

Finally, the greater canvas and the more involved plot of the novel naturally mean a more leisurely movement than is possible in the short-story, though many sensational novels of the romantic type (not typical novels, and certainly not models in any sense)

crowd incident with tremendous speed. But usually the realistic novelist takes plenty of time to make his characters philosophize on questions germane to the period, or to advocate a cause, or to expose a condition.

Not so the short-story. Since it must "move swiftly to its climax," all its mechanism is simplified and divested of clogging parts. At first this necessity for compression may seem to hamper the writer, but in reality it offers greater freedom. Themes too slight for the sustained spirit of the novel, light bits of fantasy, intense but brief incidents of life, all make admirable grist for the short-story mill. Love, which permeates nearly all novels, whether romantic or realistic, is not a necessary accessory of the short-story. The details of life, character and setting, which the novelist paints in with minute attention, the short-story writer delineates with a few swift strokes -- which must be all the more deft because they are so few.

Thus, in its singleness of effect, in its more minute scope, and in its simplicity of structure, the short-story proves itself to be something quite different from a mere condensed novel.

## 2. THE SHORT-STORY IS NOT AN EPISODE

. . . Excerpt from *Roderick Random, The Vicar of Wakefield, or Tom Jones*, almost any one of the complete episodes with which they abound, and extract might be called the short tale. Do likewise with many a complete episode from some modern novels and you have the same. In neither case, however, would the episode exhibit the plot, the sense of coming to a point, of ending up, which is necessary to the short-story. To make a first-class short-story longer would be to spoil it. The reader feels the conclusion and would not turn the page of the magazine to see if there is anything more. While the episode fits in with the rest of the novel, into which it was parenthetically insert to illustrate some phase of character or conduct, the short-story is not meant to dovetail into a novel which is to appear later.

To be sure, certain short-stories -- notable detective stories nowadays -- are linked in series; but in each part the story comes to a full stop, a satisfying resolution -- to use a musical figure. The connection with the other stories of the series is in the detective, perhaps, or in the lay expert, not in any relation of the plots.

## 3. THE SHORT-STORY IS NOT A SCENARIO, OR SYNOPSIS

This is not very different from saying what has been said -- that the short-story is not a condensed novel. Yet there is a distinction which a word will suffice emphasize.

In plotting out a play or a novel the author may make a scenario. Or a synopsis may be made after the work has been completed. But such a skeleton would lack red blood as surely as it would be awkward and uninteresting, if not actually repellent. The play of character, the pungency of conversation, the photography of description, would be absent. Many of the tales of the *Decameron* of Boccaccio suffer for lack of these qualities. Compression is essential, but it will not do to squeeze a story to death.

#### 4. IT IS NOT A BIOGRAPHY

This would seem to be obvious, yet every editor receives a surprising number of life-stories, complete from birth to burial, with no central incident, no unified, to justify their writing. "Johnnie Shark" is such a biography -- albeit the life of a diverting fish. "Marse Chan," by Thomas Nelson Page, one of the finest of our modern fictions, is a fictive biography rather than a short-story. . . .

#### 5. IT IS NOT A MERE SKETCH

In the Vatican there are notable collections of pencil drawings by Michelangelo. Examine them and you will marvel at their delicate strength of line, their suggestive beauty will enchant you. But what is their final effect? General, only general. They tell no story; they leave with you no message; they are incomplete sketches. The figures of sibyls and prophets, wonderful as they are as examples of pose, movement, and fore shortening, do not possess a narrative value. For that we must look to the Last Judgment and the Biblical stories frescoed by the master of the Sistine Chapel.

Again, when Ruskin criticized the brilliant color studies of Turner he refused to consider them as pictures, and though they hang today in the basement of the National Gallery in London under the same roof as the artist's completed masterpieces, still they remain what Ruskin knew them to be -- mere records of color, studies of phases of color-truth, unorganized impressions.

Just so, whatever value work-sketches of character and atmosphere may possess -- and many do have an incomparable value as impressionistic records, as suggestive studies -- they are not short-stories, for in them nothing happens; they have neither essential beginning nor necessary ending; they leave no single completed impression; they lack the effect of totality on which Poe so constantly insisted. What more exquisite piece of descriptive prose narrative does the English language hold than Lafcadio Hearn's "Chita"? And it perfectly illustrates the fictional sketch which is not a short-story.

#### 6. THE SHORT-STORY IS NOT A TALE

Once more the matter of nomenclature raises a difficulty. The terms "tale" and "short-story" are commonly used interchangeably. Poe so uses them, Mr. Henry James loosely refers to novels as tales, and Professor Brander Matthews now and then indulges a free transfer of the expressions. Indeed, it will not do to be too precise here, for the tale readily drifts over into the short-story, and the latter into the former. However, for the purposes of a treatise of this scope it seems necessary to make between theses close kindred a discrimination which is more academic, for to deny the distinction entirely is not to class the short-story as a separate literary species. . . .

"A tale is a simple narrative, usually short, having actually no plot, developing no essential change in the relation of the characters, and depending for its interest upon incidents rather upon plot and the revelation of character."

Here is an attempt at a grouping of

## KINDS OF TALES

(Classified as to Purpose)

### DIDACTIC

Fable  
Parable  
Allegory  
Moral

### ENTERTAINING

Sporting  
Adventure  
Strange Experience  
Humorous

### EITHER DIDACTIC OR ENTERTAINING

Myth  
Legend  
Anecdote  
Travel  
Historical  
True Story

Whether designed to teach a lesson or to tell a story for entertainment, all of the foregoing themes, when cast in the form of the tale, will be found to be simple narrative. Fundamentally they do not conform to Poe's important law that the short-story should march in all its parts directly and swiftly toward a single impression. The tale admits of digressions, moral or amusing reflections, and loosely-connected episodes ad libitum. The reader feels it to be, not a skillfully organized and compact unity, but a mere incident taken out of a larger experience, more of which similar kind might be related if the narrator would.

Now it must be borne constantly in mind that the magazines today are printing many excellent tales, which touch in one, two, or three points the peculiar genre of the short-story, and in proportion as they do this more fully they become less the tale and more the short-story, until sometimes the "middle wall of partition" becomes like a hair -- too thin to split.

The best examples of tales which consciously seek the methods and the effects which we now credit to the short-story are those of Washington Irving. Here and there, too, the same may be said of Chaucer's poetic *Canterbury Tales* and the stories of

Boccaccio . In his Introduction to the *Tales of a Traveler* , Irving says: "For my part, I consider a story merely as a frame upon which to stretch my materials. It is the play of thought, and sentiment, and language; the weaving in of characters, lightly, yet expressively delineated; the familiar and faithful exhibition of scenes in common life; and the half-concealed vein of humor that is often playing through the whole -- these are among what I aim at, and upon which I felicitate myself in proportion as I think succeed."

In that exposition of his art, Irving erected the first critical half-way house between the tale and the short-story. . .

## II. WHAT A SHORT-STORY IS

Having seen in what respects other narrative forms -- the novel, the episode, the scenario or synopsis, the biography, the sketch, and the tale -- differ from the short-story, it will be a much briefer task to assemble its positive qualities.

### THE TRUE SHORT-STORY IS MARKED BY SEVEN CHARACTERISTICS:

1. A Single Predominating Incident
2. A Single Preeminent Character
3. Imagination
4. Plot
5. Compression
6. Organization
7. Unity of Impression

All of these either have been discussed in the negative exposition or will be touched upon later. Perhaps, then, it is time to attempt a definition:

"A Short-Story is a brief, imaginative narrative, unfolding a single predominant 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."

In proportion as the short-story embodies and combines its seven parts artistically, that is to say harmoniously and effectively, it is great. Not all great short-stories are great at all points. Though no unnecessary point should be excluded, and important factor omitted, still its brilliant qualities may atone for its defective parts. Thus criticism must be flexible and unprejudiced. Suppose the London publishers had declined Dickens's novels because they exhibited grave defects!

Do not forget the whole is greater than the sum of all its parts. The completed result must possess a spirit all its own, it must be almost a living personality. And who will analyze that for us and lay bare its vital secret? At every stage of our inquiry we must feel how impossible it is to saw up a story and find anything more than lumber, or to nail and glue its parts together and have aught other than a grinning wooden clown. The story, the yarn, is the big thing. Unless the writer has a story to tell, the telling of it is foolish contradiction . . . .

Eisenwein, J. Berg. "What is a Short Story." 1915. *Global Perspectives: the International Short Story*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Glenn Turner. Elgin: Homespan Publishing, 1995. 1-5. Print.