
UNIT 14 INTRODUCTION TO THE SHORT STORY

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14.0 OBJECTIVES

You will read four short stories in this Block. But before you begin to read them, let us look at the characteristics of the short story briefly, in this Unit. This will provide us with general guidelines on how to read a short story analytically. If you read this Unit carefully, you should be able to :

- explain what a short story is;
- outline the rise and development of the short story as a literary form;
- distinguish between a short story and a novel;
- analyze the elements of the short story.

14.1 INTRODUCTION

As you know, in this course we shall study different forms of prose such as the short story, novel, essay, biography and autobiography. In this Block, we shall read four short stories. But before we do that, we shall give you an introduction to the short story as a literary form. What is a short story? When was it first written? When we read a short story, what must we look for in order to decide whether it has artistic merit or not? These are some of the questions that we shall address in this Unit.

Moreover, we shall discuss the main features of a short story. This will give you some idea about how to read a short story analytically. We must, however, point out that literary appreciation does not proceed like a mathematical exercise. We cannot acquire a set of critical formulae and apply these to each and every story that we come across. Such guidelines can only be of partial help. It is only by extensive reading and close analysis of a large number of short stories that we find we are getting better and better with practice.

We hope that you will not only read the stories in your course but also read other stories from anthologies and magazines. We suggest that you complete the given exercises before looking at the answers provided at the end of the Unit.

14.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF A SHORT STORY

You must have noticed that most discussions of literature concentrate on the novel, drama and poetry. The short story is often regarded as a sort of poor relation, not

worth serious consideration. Katherine Mansfield (whose story 'A Cup of Tea' you will read in Unit 17) was once asked:

'What do you do in life?'

'I am a writer'.

'Do you write dramas?'

'No'. It sounded as if she were sorry she did not.

'Do you write tragedies, novels, romances?' I persisted, because she looked as if she could write these. 'No', she said, and with still deeper distress; 'only short stories; just short stories'.

Later on she told me she felt so wretched at that moment she would have given anything if she could have answered at least one 'yes' to the 'big' things. (Quoted in Anthony Alpers, *The Life of Katherine Mansfield* (1980), p. 381).

It is clear that Mansfield is apologetic about writing short stories. On the other hand, there is another practitioner of the art, Edgar Allan Poe, who believes that the short story is superior to the novel. It is not necessary to agree with either of these opinions. Let us begin with the notion that the short story is equal to any other literary genre be it poetry, drama or the novel.

14.2.1 What Is A Short Story?

We can all recognize a short story when we see one. But when it comes to defining a short story, there are problems. There are so many different kinds of short stories, that no single definition would cover all. So, at best, we can only attempt to define a short story in the most general terms.

A short story is a piece of prose fiction complete in itself and of a moderate length. This definition excludes all stories written in verse. For example, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, written in the closing years of the fourteenth century, can be seen as an interesting collection of stories, but as they are written in verse they cannot be taken as examples of the short story. Moreover, a short story is different from a tale or fable because it is not just a story but a complex and developed literary form that can be traced only to the early nineteenth century. A **tales** is primarily an oral form. The oral tradition of story-telling still exists in the villages of India where generations of children, sitting round the fire of a winter evening, still listen in awe to stories of fairies, gods and demons.

A **fable** is a short tale which usually conveys a moral. The characters in a fable are usually animals talking like human beings. Perhaps you are familiar with the tales of *Panchatantra* which is a collection of fables. Short stories are also different from parables. A **parable** is a story which presents a moral. The contemporary short story also has a meaning, a point to be made, but it is not a parable because that meaning in itself is not important. A short story is also different from an **anecdote**. An anecdote relates an interesting happening or a series of happenings or events. A short story may also present these events. But the difference lies in the fact that in a short story these happenings or events are not important in themselves but are a manifestation of the true nature and significance of a character or situation.

14.2.2 How 'Short' is a Short Story?

It is difficult to establish the average length of a short story. Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), an American short story writer, says that it requires 'from half an hour to one or two hours in its perusal'. Let us look at this prize-winning short story :

I was on the train from London to Edinburgh.

There was this man, seated across from me.

'Do you believe in ghosts?' he said,

'No', I said,

He disappeared.

Do you think this is a short story? It seems more like an anecdote. You will find that most stories are anecdotal but as we know, in a short story the events are not, in general important in themselves but usually highlight a character/characters or situation. The point that has to be stressed here is that we can either find very short short stories or rather long ones like those of Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) which can

be called *novellas*. A novella is somewhere between a short story and the novel in length. Whatever the length, it should generally be possible to complete a short story at one sitting, as Poe has suggested.

14.2.3 What is a Short Story About?

A short story has an unlimited range of possible themes just like any other literary genre. A short story may be about a particular scene, a series of connected incidents, a moral issue, an aspect of life, a phase of character or an interesting experience. In sum, a short story can be about anything.

The modern short story may not even have a story, but it is certainly fictional. A short story illuminates some aspect of life or characters. A well-written short story must convey the impression of completeness. In some stories there is no clear cut ending or resolution of the crisis; yet the effect is one of organic unity. What do we mean by organic unity? It is not just the unity of a beginning, a middle and an end. The unity lies in the way the writer has given shape to a mass of details. As we know, a writer is faced with a range of possible ways in which to write the story. S/he must select the relevant details as it is not possible to narrate everything. The writer then works these selected details into a complete organic whole. What do we mean by 'organic whole'? For example, if we cut an arm off a body, the body is no longer an organic whole but is mutilated. Just as it is not possible to remove a single limb without mutilating the body, similarly in a well-constructed short story, it should not be possible to remove a single detail.

14.2.4 What is it that Matters in a Short Story?

Is it the writer's preoccupation with form? Or does the greatness of a story depend on the extent to which it has depicted the range of human experience? Is a short story great because of the writer's technique? Or does a short story have literary merit because of its originality of theme and style? Or is it because a certain kind of story is in fashion? Or does a story matter because it has the power to move us? A short story defies exact definition. However, an effective short story must arouse and hold the reader's interest and must convey a sense of completeness, in a style that suits the content. All these elements then contribute to the final effect that the story may have.

Check Your Progress I

Read the following questions and write your answers in the space provided. In case you have some doubts, you may go back to the previous section. Please try to write the answers in your own words.

i) Define the characteristics of a short story.

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ii) What is the difference between?

a) a short story and a fable.

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b) a short story and an anecdote.

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c) a short story and a parable.
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iii) How short is a short story?
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iv) What in your opinion are the elements that make a short story effective?
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14.3 THE SHORT STORY AND THE NOVEL

Let us now examine the similarities and differences between the short story and the novel. The novel and the short story are both written in prose, both are fictional and make use of varieties of prose such as narrative and descriptive. But it is in scope that they differ. A novel is wide-ranging and long, the short story is brief and deals with a limited subject. A short story is not a novel in a condensed form. You cannot summarize a novel and call it a short story.

In the novel, you will notice, the interest is spread over a larger area. In a short story, you will find a narrower focus, but a greater concentration of interest. For instance in a novel there are many characters whereas in a short story you have only a very few characters or in some, only one. A novelist has the time and space to make his/her characters unfold and develop gradually, but the short story writer must create and reveal the characters in a few suggestive strokes.

In a novel, there is usually a main plot and several sub-plots. But in a short story you will find only one plot with one main aim. Each word used helps in furthering the aim of the story. A novel may extend over several years but a short story usually covers a more limited time span. In a novel, the narrator may indulge in meditative remarks, digressions and detailed descriptions, but the short story writer achieves his/her effects by brevity. A short story may dispense with the narrator completely and achieve his/her effects by presenting events as they occur. S/he makes use of suggestion rather than explanation. These then are some of the ways in which the short story differs from the novel. It also makes us appreciate the fact that the art of story-writing is not as simple as it may appear. It demands great mastery of technique so that an effect of brevity, unity, concentration and intensity is achieved.

We have already mentioned in 14.2.1 that the short story as a literary form only came to be written in the early nineteenth century. Let us then survey its rise and development.

14.4 THE RISE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE SHORT STORY

Stories have always held a great fascination for us and you may remember many stories told to you as young children. Interest in stories is as old as human history. Even before the art of writing was known, early human beings must have narrated tales of the day's hunting or stories of gods and demons to one another. These were probably transmitted by word of mouth from one generation to the next. The oldest recorded example is probably the Egyptian tale of *The Two Brothers* dating from 3200 B.C. The *Jataka* (a collection of stories of Buddha's earlier incarnations) and *Panchatantra* tales (Sanskrit tales that seem to belong to the Jataka tradition and are about animals) are India's contribution to the world of stories and have continued to interest people through the ages. These along with the fables of Aesop (Greek fables with animals as characters and having a moral), stories in the Bible and the tales from the *Arabian Nights* are all precursors or forerunners of the short story.

14.4.1 The Rise of the Short Story

The short story as a literary form began to be written in the early nineteenth century. However, it was only before the last decade of the nineteenth century that the term 'short story' was used. The rise of the short story can be attributed to:

- a) the rise of the reading public; more and more people were beginning to read fiction in the nineteenth century;
- b) the increase in the number of periodicals which could publish fiction;
- c) widespread literacy; education was now more widely accessible;
- d) hurry and pace of modern life.

The first three factors also contributed to the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century. The novels written in those days were rather lengthy. In fact, in the nineteenth century, the three-decker novel was a popular phenomenon. A single novel usually came in three volumes. These days people do not have the time to read such long stories. Short stories, on the other hand, can be read while travelling or relaxing and do not require a substantial investment of time.

14.4.2 The Development of the Short Story

The short story developed in the hands of writers many of whom were also novelists. But as you will notice, the techniques of the novelist and the short story writer are to some extent similar as well as different. This may sound a bit confusing at this stage, but it will get clearer as you read the section on the short story and the novel. This will become clear after you have read this Block as well as Blocks 5 and 6 on the novel.

Let us now tell you about some well-known story writers, who were masters of this art. Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) is an American novelist and short story writer. Another famous nineteenth century American short story writer is Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). Both have written about the unusual and the terrible. Their stories are full of horror and the supernatural. Poe's story 'The Masque of the Red Death' is worth reading.

Guy de Maupassant (1850-93), a French writer is considered one of the masters of the short story. He wrote about the private joys and sorrows of individuals rather than about momentous events. Because of his acute observation, Maupassant portrayed the world as he saw it, describing it in clear and simple prose. His stories move swiftly and logically giving only the essential details of character and situation. His stories end with a sting in the tail or an ironic twist that takes the reader by surprise. Consider, for example, the ending of his famous story 'The Necklace'. A pretty and vain young wife of a clerk aspires to a higher social status on account of her extraordinary beauty. She borrows a diamond necklace from a rich friend to wear at the Minister's ball. She is a tremendous success as even the minister notices her. But the fabulous evening carries the seeds of tragedy, for she loses the necklace. What then follows is a ten-year period of drudgery and deprivation to buy a necklace to replace the lost one. When she finally reveals this to her friend, from whom she had borrowed the necklace, the friend remarks: 'But mine was fake!' This then is the

sting-in-the-tail, a technique that Anton Tchekov, (1860-1904) the Russian master of the story also adopted.

Tchekov's stories probe the tragic element of the trivial things in life. 'The Kiss' is the story of a shy young man who during the course of a dinner-party ventures into a dark room. Here he is kissed by a young lady who had probably mistaken him for her lover. The young man builds up an absurd romantic dream around this incident which only shatters when he finally realizes that the kiss was not meant for him. Tchekov explores the pathos of the situation.

There have been great English short story writers starting with R.L. Stevenson (1850-94). His stories feature evil action and moral corruption, Hardy's (1840-1928) *Wessex Tales* carry a sense of tragedy that pervades all Hardy's works, Henry James (1843-1916) and Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) were interested not so much in brevity as in form. The conventional short story has a beginning, a middle and an end. Recent stories are more open-ended, in the sense that there is no clear beginning, middle and end, as you will discover when you read the stories prescribed for you.

What about Indian short story writers? The short story as a literary form is popular in all the Indian languages and many of these short stories are translated into English. In fact the Sahitya Akademi encourages the translation of regional literatures into English and vice versa. Penguin also publishes translated short stories and if you come across *Deliverance and Other Stories* by Premchand which is translated by David Rubin, you will find the collection most interesting. We have selected a short story from Premchand for you and based the final exercise on it. Mulk Raj Anand, (whose story 'The Lost Child' you will read in Unit 16) R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao (you will read 'Javni' in Unit 15) Anita Desai and Kamala Das are some of the famous Indian short story writers in English. That the short story is alive in India is quite clear from the fact that serials like 'Ek Kahani' are popular on TV.

The short story has developed in so many directions that it is impossible to list all the varieties within it. There are the short stories that one can find in popular periodicals and 'literary' short stories that are found in anthologies. When we buy a magazine which has short stories in it to read on a railway journey, we often find these stories racy and full of interesting incidents. We read them purely for enjoyment. On the other hand, when we read a 'literary' short story we often find that along with enjoyment, it also contributes to our understanding of life and human nature. This distinction is similar to the difference between 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow'—categories that we find applied to separate the 'popular' from what is considered 'great' literature.

14.5 SOME HINTS ON READING A SHORT STORY

Whenever we read a piece of literature, whether it is a poem, a novel or a play, we respond to it in many ways. One of the responses may be that we either like it or we don't. In any case, we should be able to say why we liked it or why it did not appeal to us.

Different persons like different kinds of stories and for different reasons. One may like a story because it immediately engages our attention. But does that alone constitute the merit of a story? When we read a story, no doubt, the development of the plot arrests our immediate attention. But along with this we also notice the way language is used, the particular style, the use of images, irony and symbolism. How effectively are time and place used? Are the descriptions vivid, relevant or redundant? What point of view does the author adopt? What is the theme and what are the effects that the author wishes to achieve? These are some of the questions that we must keep in mind while reading a story.

14.5.1 Plot

Every story has a plot. It is the sequence of events or incidents of which a story is composed. These events or incidents are inter-related as one thing happens because of another. A well-constructed plot would have conflict either between individuals, groups, the individual and forces such as nature, society, etc. It would also have elements of surprise and mystery. But above all the plot must have unity—each event

must grow logically out of the previous one. We shall discuss 'plot' again in our Unit on 'Introduction to the Novel' in Block 5.

14.5.2 Characters

All stories have characters. The main character is called the protagonist. How does the author present character? S/he either tells us about the character or shows him/her interacting with other characters in the story or reacting to different situations. This gives us an idea about what the character is like. How do we know if the presentation of character is successful? When the author is able to create a life-like character, we know that s/he has achieved his/her aim. It should seem as if the fictional character is someone whom we could meet in real life. In detective stories or stories where the action is dominant, characters are not significant.

As we know, in real life there are no perfectly good or purely evil characters but persons with complex virtues and vices. Similarly, fictional characters must have a range of different traits. And when we are writing a character sketch we should not repeat what a person has *done* but what a person *is*. In short, we have to pick out the traits in his/her character and not just give a summary of the story.

14.5.3 Time and Place

Each story is set in a particular time and place. The author can either tell the story in a chronological sequence or may start at the end and keep going back and forth in time. Place is equally important and you should try to identify the details that form part of the setting of the story. The next point is to try and discover how the author has tried to use setting in order to heighten the effect of the story. For example, in horror stories, the setting is usually a dark ancient castle or a bleak graveyard. Thus setting contributes to the *atmosphere* or *mood* of the story. But setting is not important in all stories. In some character may be important, in others situation. When we are reading story, we must keep this aspect in mind.

14.5.4 Style

Each author has his/her own style. For example, it is impossible to say that Mulk Raj Anand has a certain distinct style of writing but even then we must be aware that each author uses a different style in different works. When we try to analyze an author's style, we should try to determine whether his/her selection of words (diction) is precise and clear and whether the ideas or actions are conveyed vividly and powerfully. We have discussed the various literary devices and techniques used by various authors to enrich their style in Blocks 1, 2, and 3 of this course.

14.5.5 The Techniques of Story-Telling

R.L. Stevenson (1850-94) has described three ways of writing a story. The writer can either begin with a plot and fit characters into it, or s/he can begin with a character and choose incidents and situations to develop it. Further an author may try to create a particular atmosphere by getting his characters and action to realize it. In earlier stories, the story-teller's personality would intrude into the narrative. In the modern short story, the author may not wish to make his/her presence felt but tries to convey the impression that the reader is witnessing or overhearing the story. The writer can make him/herself totally unobtrusive by recording the dialogue and actions objectively. In a first-person narrative, the author disappears completely and the reader enters directly into the experiences of the character/s. The author may make use of the omniscient point of view or take recourse to selective omniscience whereby we experience events from the point of view of what one or two characters see and hear. Some of the techniques of the novelist (as you will see in the next two Blocks) are also the techniques of the short story writer. But the story writer is working within the limitations of space and form therefore his/her task is all the more difficult. In a short story the author must:

- a) convey the impression of spontaneity;
- b) avoid intellectual comments and digressions;
- c) know when enough has been said;
- d) avoid too many explanations.

In short, as a story has limited form the writer must work by suggestion rather than by long-drawn explanations. Different elements like character, style, point of view.

setting cannot be analyzed in isolation, but must be seen as part of the larger whole. What is important is how far these elements contribute to the final effect of the story.

Each story would necessarily have a different effect on different people. It is for this reason that there can be many interpretations of a particular story. What we wish to stress here is that your response to a story is as valid as that of anyone else. And as you read the stories in your course, we hope that you will not only enjoy them but will also read them analytically.

Check Your Progress II

Read the following story and answer the questions given below.

A SERVANT OF THE PEOPLE

Premchand

(Translated into English by David Rubin)

The servant of the nation said, 'There is only one way to redeem the country and that is to treat the low as brothers, the outcastes as equals. In the world we are all brothers; no one is high, no one is low'.

The world cheered. 'How sublime a vision, how compassionate a heart!'

His beautiful daughter Indira heard and was plunged into a sea of care.

The servant of the people embraced a young man of low caste.

The world said, 'He is an angel, an apostle, the pilot of the ship of state!'

Indira watched and her eyes began to glow.

The servant of the people brought the young man of low caste inside the temple into the presence of God and said, 'Our God is in poverty, in misfortune and in degradation'.

The world said, 'How pure in heart he is! How wise!'

Indira looked and smiled.

Indira went to the servant of the people and said, 'Respected father, I wish to marry Mohan'.

The servant of the people looked at her with loving eyes and asked, 'Who is Mohan?'

Indira said joyously, 'Mohan is the honest, brave and good young man you embraced and brought into the temple'.

The servant of the people looked at her with the eyes of doom and turned away.

i) What do you learn about the character of 'a servant of the people'?

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ii) Is the title of the story ironical? If so, elaborate.

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 iii) Comment briefly on Premchand's technique in this story.

14.6 LET US SUM UP

Let us now recapitulate what we have discussed in this Unit, We have looked at:

- the main characteristics of the short story;
- the difference between a short story and a tale, fable, parable, anecdote, novella and novel;
- the rise and development of the short story as a literary form;
- the aspects to look for when reading a short story.

Why do we read short stories? No, not for getting through examinations. Nor purely for enjoyment, but also because they deepen our awareness of life. By illuminating some aspect of human life or behaviour, a short story presents an insight into the nature and conditions of our existence. You will read the stories that we have selected for you in the next four Units. We hope you will find it an interesting and rewarding experience.

14.7 SUGGESTED READING

If you would like to read more about the short story as a literary form, you may like to look at the following books:

Walter Allen, *The Short Story*, London : Oxford University Press, 1981.

John Bayley, *The Short Story*, Sussex : Harvester, 1988.

If you are interested in reading some short stories by Indian authors, you might look at the anthology : Mulk Raj Anand and S. Balurao (eds.) *Panorama*, New Delhi, Sterling Publishers, 1986.

14.8 ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

Check Your Progress I

- i) Even though it is difficult to define a short story exactly, it is (a) a piece of prose fiction, (b) complete in itself, (c) of moderate length.

A short story as a literary form only dates back to the early nineteenth century. It is different from a tale, an anecdote and a parable.

- ii) (a) A tale is generally an oral form of story-telling and has a long history. A short story on the other hand, is a developed literary form that can be traced only to the early nineteenth century.
 - (b) An anecdote relates an event or a series of events. Even a short story may relate an event or a series of events but in a short story the events are not important in themselves. The focus is mainly on the character/s and situation.
 - (c) A parable is a story with a moral. It is the meaning that is important. A short story has meaning, but here that is not the central point.
- iii) & (iv) Refer to Section 14.2.2 and 14.2.4.

Check Your Progress II

- i) The servant of the people seems noble indeed. Not only does he declare that all men are equal but he also embraces a young man of low caste. The public cheers as he leads this young man into the temple. The importance of this action becomes clear when we realize that when Premchand was writing, untouchability was widely prevalent in society and persons of low caste were denied entry into temples. The public adulation seems justified. It is only when Indira, his own daughter expresses her desire to marry Mohan, the young man of low caste, that the real character of the “servant of the people” is exposed.
- ii) The title of the story is ironical. The man is only masquerading as a servant of the people. The story effectively exposes the hypocrisy and double standards of politicians who fool the public by such fake acts of virtue.
- iii) When discussing the technique, you can take into account the following points :
 - a) how Premchand works by suggestion rather than detail;
 - b) the omniscient narrator who ‘shows’ the actions of the “servant of the people” on the one hand and the effect on the public on the other.
 - c) the final sting-in-the-tail or surprise ending.