

On the Importance of Short Stories

Short stories seem like an obvious thing - it's a story that's shorter than a novel. However, short stories represent the kind of creativity and work that few people can master. They mirror the ancient tradition of storytelling for entertainment as well as a method of recording history. We have recorded stories from Babylonia and Egypt, so it's been around since humans have been able to write. Short stories presented as tales and legends in the Middle Ages and surged during the Renaissance. *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer is an example of a collection of short stories (about a pilgrimage to the shrine of Thomas Becket).

The scope of a short story is limited, so the ability to "complete" a full narrative in a small word count is hard. How does one achieve setting, character development, and the entire plot diagram with a few thousand words? Therefore, the goal is often to reach some level of *satisfaction* that the reader experiences.

History of the Short Story in America as we know it

- Saw the rise of short stories during the 19th century when industry and agriculture was shifting
- American workers moved from city to city for jobs (transient lives)
- Newspapers used to print serials but soon those lacked consistent readers
- Writers altered their work so a story could start and finish without the space of the newspaper
- *The Atlantic Monthly* - first issue November 1857
 - "Journal of literature, politics, science, and the arts"
 - A response to the desire to create an "American Idea"
 - Founders gathered in Boston; wanted to create a magazine that would engage readers with new ideas that would eventually bridge the gap of partisanship
 - Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes
 - The first issue published a mission statement signed by writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Nathaniel Hawthorne
 - Made a statement that literature mattered universally
- Short stories became a fixture with *The Atlantic Monthly*, among others
 - *The Strand Magazine* (England) published works by Leo Tolstoy, GK Chesterton, Agatha Christie, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
- Used to be a money maker; the Lost Generation writers are known for the short stories (F. Scott Fitzgerald earned a living solely on short stories when his novels wouldn't sell)
- The decline of short stories began in the 1920s when movies were available to everyone.
- The rise of film became the short story's ultimate nemesis. Why read when you can watch?
- Short stories are still published in major magazines - *The Atlantic*, *Esquire*, *New York Times Magazine* - but they are primarily printed in specialty literary magazines (online and print) for little to no money

Techniques

- Straightforward narrative representing various genres (sci-fi, fantasy, horror, realism)
- Allegories, fables, fairy tales, and myths - to teach a lesson
- Legends and tales - typically connected to a specific culture (how a culture speaks to itself); they ultimately cross boundaries, but that's not how they begin; Robin Hood and "The Gift of the Magi" are examples
- Literary sketch - an account of culture, a look into another way of life; less drama, more observation

"A good short story crosses the borders of our nations and our prejudices and our beliefs. A good short story asks a question that can't be answered in simple terms. And even if we come up with some understanding, years later, while glancing out of a window, the story still has the potential to return, to alter right there in our mind and change everything." - Walter Mosely (crime writer)

Take a Three-Pronged Approach to Literature

1. **Experience it.** Read it and make sure you know the gist of what you're reading, at a minimum. Observe your initial reaction and response.
2. **Interpret it.** Try to make sense of it. Make connections. This is when you start to form a subjective opinion based on your own perspectives. If you can't make sense of it on your own, read other analysis for help, particularly if you think you're missing the *context* of a story. (What is context?)
 - a. Four interpretive actions: observe, connect, infer, conclude
 - b. We often make judgments as we read, but those aren't always the conclusions we end with.
 - c. Time and space give us room to think.
3. **Evaluate it.** Assess its literary quality. Is it any good? Even if you don't like the story, was it told well? Can you appreciate its message or style? Does it have value? How you answer these questions results in your evaluation. Your evaluation is heavily influenced by your interests, your experiences, your age and stage of life, and your personal morals and values. It will change over time. What you like reading now may not be what you appreciate as an adult, as a professional, as a parent, etc.

The world's shortest short story (inaccurately attributed to Ernest Hemingway; according to legend, he made a bet with a few guys in a bar that he could write a six-word story to make them cry; he won the bet):

For sale: baby shoes, never worn.