

History Of The Short Story

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SHORT STORY

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There's something you should know. The short story was very nearly drowned in the tub as an infant. As literary forms go, the short story is very young. Certainly its roots go back centuries — we can see it gestating in the *Canterbury Tales*, in fairy tales and in poems of a middling length. Arguably, even the conversational traditions of the anecdote, the joke and the parable, can be seen as precursors of the form. But the short story as we know it sprang into full-fledged existence as recently as the 1820s. It appeared, unheralded, to fill a sudden need created by the invention of the "gift book."

Gift books were annual collections of poems, artwork and literary criticism, aimed primarily at an audience of upper-class women in England and North America. Seeking additional ways to fill the pages of these popular publications, editors began soliciting submissions of short pieces of prose to accompany artwork already purchased (rather the opposite of the way it is usually done these days). In so doing, they created the first paying market for short fiction. All modern literary magazines can trace their pedigree back to these gift books. In 1837, Nathaniel Hawthorne collected a number of stories that he had written for the gift book market and published them to great critical acclaim as *Twice Told Tales*. And with that, short stories had arrived.

Two hundred years may seem quite a long time, but consider that the novel dates back to at least 1605 (the year Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* was published) and you get a better idea of the short story's relative youth. Over its entire lifetime, the fate of the form has been inextricably tied to that of magazines. In the early 20th century, literacy in the United States and Canada became near universal for the first time and, as a direct result, magazine sales boomed. On the erudite front, there were publications like *The English Review* and *The Southwest Review*, but there were also the decidedly lower brow *Argosy* and *Adventure*. This was the era of the pulp magazine and it brought with it the birth of genre literature.

Horror stories, detective stories and most especially science fiction evolved in short stories, cut their teeth in the magazines. It is no surprise that the beginning of the Golden Age of Science Fiction is identified most strongly not with a novel but with the publication of a magazine (the July 1939 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*, to be precise). Most of the formative novels of early- and mid-20th century science fiction were more like grown-up short stories in form than like other contemporary novels. In fact, some of the most famous science fiction novels — including Isaac Asimov's *Foundation*, A.E. Van Vogt's *The Silkie*, Robert A. Heinlein's *Orphans of the Sky* and Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* — were fix-ups (a term for a novel created by stitching a series of previously published short stories together). It wasn't until quite recently, around the 1984 publication of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and the 1985 publication of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, that the two parallel traditions of the science fiction novel and the modern literary novel began to collide.

History of the short story is a fascinating journey through time, reflecting the evolution of human expression, culture, and storytelling. From ancient folklore to modern literary masterpieces, the short story has adapted to the changing landscape of society and the arts. This article explores the origins, development, and significance of the short story as a literary form, highlighting key periods, influential authors, and notable works that have shaped its trajectory.

Origins of the Short Story

The short story has roots that can be traced back to ancient times. Early storytelling was an oral tradition, where tales were passed down through generations, often serving to convey moral lessons, entertain, or explain natural phenomena.

Oral Traditions

1. Folklore and Mythology:

- Stories were often brief and focused on specific events or morals.
- Examples include fables, fairy tales, and parables that conveyed life lessons.

2. Cultural Significance:

- These stories served as a means of preserving history and cultural identity.
- They often reflected the values, beliefs, and social norms of the time.

Written Records

With the advent of writing, stories began to be recorded. Ancient civilizations, such as the Mesopotamians and Egyptians, created short narratives that have influenced later literary forms.

1. The Epic of Gilgamesh:

- One of the earliest known works, it contains elements that resemble short stories within its broader epic framework.

2. Aesop's Fables:

- A collection of fables attributed to Aesop, these stories are concise and carry moral lessons, marking a significant step in the development of the short story.

The Short Story in the Middle Ages and Renaissance

As we move into the Middle Ages, the short story began to evolve further, influenced by the social and cultural changes of the period.

Medieval Literature

1. The Canterbury Tales (14th Century):

- Geoffrey Chaucer's work is a collection of stories narrated by a group of pilgrims. Each tale is a self-contained narrative, showcasing a variety of themes and styles.

2. The Decameron (14th Century):

- Written by Giovanni Boccaccio, this collection of 100 tales is framed within a story of a group escaping the plague. It reflects the human experience and the art of storytelling.

Renaissance and the Birth of the Modern Short Story

During the Renaissance, the short story began to take on a more defined form.

1. Development of Prose:

- The rise of prose fiction allowed for more nuanced character development and intricate plots.

2. Notable Authors:

- Writers like Michel de Montaigne and Miguel de Cervantes contributed to the evolution of the short story through their explorations of human nature and society.

The Short Story in the 19th Century

The 19th century marked a significant period in the history of the short story, characterized by a growing interest in the genre and the establishment of a unique literary identity.

Romanticism and Realism

1. Romanticism:

- Short stories began to explore themes of emotion, nature, and the individual's experience. Authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe utilized the form to delve into psychological depth and dark themes.

2. Realism:

- Writers like Anton Chekhov focused on everyday life and ordinary characters, bringing a new level of authenticity to the short story. Chekhov is often credited with elevating the form to an art, emphasizing subtext and understated narratives.

Emergence of the Short Story as a Literary Form

1. Literary Magazines:

- The proliferation of literary magazines in the 19th century provided a platform for short stories, allowing authors to reach broader audiences.

2. Notable Figures:

- Other key writers included Guy de Maupassant, who mastered the art of the surprise ending, and O. Henry, known for his witty narratives and twist endings.

The 20th Century: Diversification and Innovation

The 20th century saw the short story continue to diversify, reflecting the complexities of modern life and the avant-garde movements in art and literature.

Modernism and Postmodernism

1. Modernist Influences:

- Writers like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce experimented with narrative structure and form, leading to more fragmented and subjective storytelling styles.

2. Postmodernism:

- This period introduced metafiction and intertextuality into the short story, with authors like Donald Barthelme and Jorge Luis Borges challenging traditional narrative conventions.

Influence of World Events

1. War and Politics:

- The world wars and societal upheaval inspired many authors to address themes of trauma, identity, and existentialism.
- Key writers included Ernest Hemingway, whose succinct prose style greatly influenced the form.

2. Cultural Movements:

- The Civil Rights Movement, feminism, and postcolonialism also informed the themes and voices of short story writers during this time.

The Short Story in Contemporary Literature

Today, the short story remains a vibrant and vital part of literature, with writers exploring a multitude of themes and styles.

Modern Voices

1. Diverse Perspectives:

- Contemporary authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Alice Munro, and Haruki Murakami have brought fresh perspectives and experiences to the genre, often reflecting a globalized world.

2. Technology and Digital Media:

- The internet has transformed how short stories are published and consumed. Online platforms and social media have created new avenues for writers to share their work and connect with readers.

Importance of the Short Story Today

1. Accessibility:

- Short stories are often more accessible in a fast-paced world, allowing readers to engage with literature in brief, impactful bursts.

2. Literary Awards:

- Many prestigious literary awards, such as the O. Henry Award and the Pushcart Prize, recognize the excellence of short story writing, ensuring that the genre retains its prominence in the literary canon.

Conclusion

The history of the short story is a testament to the power of storytelling as a means of exploring the human experience. From its ancient origins to its modern iterations, the short story has adapted and evolved, remaining a relevant and essential form of literature. As writers continue to innovate and experiment, the future of the short story promises to be as dynamic and diverse as its past, inviting readers to engage with new voices and ideas. The enduring appeal of the short story lies in its ability to capture moments of truth and insight, offering a glimpse into the complexities of life in a compact form.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the origins of the short story as a literary form?

The short story has roots in ancient oral traditions and folklore, with early examples found in cultures worldwide, including Aesop's Fables in Greece and The Panchatantra in India.

Which literary movements contributed to the popularity of the short story in the 19th century?

The Romantic and Realist movements significantly contributed to the popularity of the short story in the 19th century, as writers sought to explore human emotions and social realities through concise narratives.

Who are some notable early practitioners of the short story?

Notable early practitioners include Edgar Allan Poe, who defined the short story as a focused narrative, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose works often blended moral allegory with short forms.

How did the short story evolve in the 20th century?

In the 20th century, the short story evolved through modernism and postmodernism, with authors experimenting with structure, perspective, and themes, leading to diverse voices and styles.

What role did magazines play in the development of the short story?

Magazines played a crucial role in the development of the short story by providing a platform for writers to publish their works, popularizing the genre, and fostering a community of readers and writers.

How have cultural shifts influenced the themes of short stories?

Cultural shifts have influenced the themes of short stories by reflecting societal changes, such as the exploration of identity, race, gender, and technology, often addressing contemporary issues in a concise format.

What impact did the rise of digital media have on short story writing?

The rise of digital media has expanded the audience for short stories, leading to new forms such as flash fiction and online literary magazines, allowing for greater accessibility and experimentation.

What is the significance of the short story in today's literary landscape?

The short story remains significant in today's literary landscape as it continues to challenge writers to convey complex ideas and emotions succinctly, serving as a vital form for emerging voices and diverse narratives.

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