

English Composition II

Introduction to the Short Story

Objectives

- Differentiate short stories from other literary forms.
- Discuss the history of the Short Story.
- Identify key elements of short stories.
- Formulate argumentative theses for essays about short stories.
- Name several authors noted for writing short stories and their most famous works.

Introduction

The short story, as it is known today, is a fairly recent innovation and was a natural reaction to the increased literacy rates of the nineteenth century and the numerous inexpensive publications that sprung up at the dawn of the industrial revolution. Since that time, the short story has become clearly established as a unique literary form, with many writers specializing in short fiction instead of novels.

While it is difficult to precisely define a piece of literature as a short story, novella, or novel, short stories maintain certain characteristics not necessarily found in other genres. In some ways, short stories are more akin to poetry than they are to their longer prose cousins. While novels may take hundreds of pages to convey their ideas, short stories use relatively little space; therefore, short stories must use very precise language and often rely on metaphor and symbolism to convey meaning. Like poetry, short stories often require explication, particularly highly imaginative and difficult works, like the stories of Jorge Luis Borges and Franz Kafka.

This lesson will focus on the history of the short story, the most common elements to be found in a short story, and methods of writing essays on short stories.

The History of the Short Story

Early Short Fiction

Short fiction has been around for centuries, occurring in texts such as the Old Testament. Much ancient short fiction took the form of fables, fairy tales, or allegories. Aesop's fables are an example of short fiction, as are the later works of Hans Christian Anderson and the Brothers Grimm. However, these early examples do not qualify as Short Stories in the modern sense, because they do not contain necessary key elements. Nevertheless, early short fiction provided the foundation for the modern short story and, deservedly, belongs in a chronology of the form. One might term this early fiction "proto short stories." The short story as it is known today began around the turn of the 19th century.

The Origins of the Short Story

In 1819, Washington Irving began publishing the *Sketch-Book*, which included his short tales "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle." These stories, along with several others, helped initiate the short story as a legitimate literary form. However, Irving's stories were very straightforward narratives that, compared to later short stories, seemed to lack what were to become essential elements of the form.

In 1837, Nathaniel Hawthorne published *Twice Told Tales*, a collection of short stories that differ from Irving's in their use of allegory and symbolism. Unlike Irving, Hawthorne's tales make use of complex imagery to explore themes such as alienation and guilt. The two volumes of this text include, "The Great Carbuncle," "The Hollow of the Three Hills," and "Legends of the Province House."

Edgar Allen Poe published his first collection of short stories in 1840; this collection included his most famous story, "The Fall of the House of Usher." Like Hawthorne, Poe relied on symbol and allegory; however, he added another ingredient to many of his stories that keeps people of all

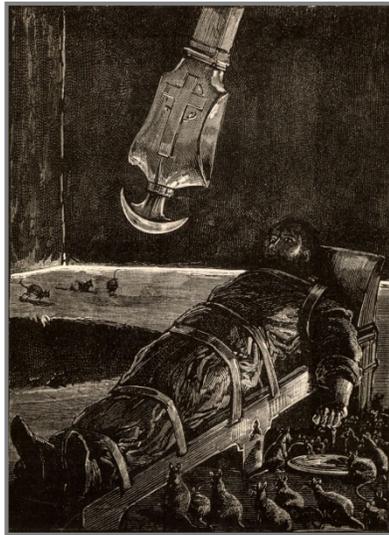


Illustration from "The Pit and the Pendulum" by Edgar Allan Poe

stripes reading him today: horror. Through his use of setting, tone, and suspense, Poe created stories that frighten people even by today's standards. But Poe was more than a horror story writer. He was also an accomplished literary critic and helped define the key elements of the short story. In his review of Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales*, Poe shares that in a short story "the unity of effect or impression is a point of the greatest importance. It is clear, moreover, that this unity cannot be thoroughly preserved in productions whose perusal cannot be completed at one sitting" (Poe, par. 4).

Throughout the nineteenth century, writers continued working with and expanding the form that Irving, Hawthorne, and Poe helped begin. Among them was Herman Melville, whose short story "Bartleby the Scrivener" ranks today as one of the great short stories of the time. Many of those who have not read the story still recognize Bartleby's refrain "I prefer not to."

Later in the century, Henry James and Mark Twain both wrote well-regarded short stories in addition to their more famous novels. James' "Daisy Miller" is among his most famous works, and Twain's "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" is a staple in high school and college classrooms.

By the end of the century, it was clear that the short story would not be departing anytime soon, if for no other reason than that entire short stories could easily be published in magazines, whereas novels needed to be serialized.

Modern Storytellers

In the twentieth century, nearly every well-known novelist, from Hemingway and Faulkner to Silko and Morrison, has published short stories, and the form is no longer uniquely American. Short stories are published in magazines and in collections. They cover every possible genre and are published in nearly every language. In fact, many of the greatest short story writers of the twentieth century are from non-English speaking countries and include names such as Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, and Yukio Mishima. While one does not generally see short stories bestseller lists, it is safe to say that they are more popular than ever. Short story collections by writers like Stephen King are often as popular as their novels, and many of the best movies that come from literature are based on short stories. No fewer than six films have been based on the short stories of Philip K. Dick.

Elements of the Short Story

What makes a short story different from earlier short fiction? And what makes it different from a novel? Length cannot be the only criterion for a short story because, if that were true, then the fables and other short fiction from the past would qualify. Beginning with Poe and continuing to the present, critics have discussed and defined the elements of a Short Story. The following list outlines some of the most agreed upon characteristics.

A typical short story contains several key elements:

Plot

Essentially, the series of incidents within which the action of the story takes places. Plots can be linear and straightforward, but they can also be disjointed and difficult to follow. The plots of short stories tend to be very tight and focused around a single event or moment in time.

Point of View

The narrator's role in the story. Is the narrator a character? Can the reader rely on the narrator's observations, or does the text give clues that the narrator may be unreliable? Can the narrator see into the minds of the characters? Does the narrator relate events in an active or passive voice? These are some of the things to look for when discerning a story's point of view.

Theme

Stories can have one or more themes. A theme is a recurring idea in a story, often conveyed through imagery or repeated language. For example, Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher" contains themes of the supernatural.

Characters

The inhabitants of a story. A short story will contain at least one character and will rarely contain more than a handful.

Setting

Where and when the story takes place. A typical short story will take place in a very focused setting. For example, "Bartleby the Scrivener" takes place in the Wall Street section of mid 19th Century New York.

In addition, a typical short story can be described as follows:

It will be unified, a complete entity unto itself.

It will be able to be read in one sitting.

It will employ precise language, making use of every word.

It will make use of symbol and metaphor to convey meaning.

It will not contain subplots or extraneous characters

The action will rise to a climax, and the story will end quickly thereafter.

Questions to Ask About Short Stories

When analyzing short stories, try to ask questions that may lead you to a thesis. The following are some of the questions you may ask:

Plot

What is the story about? Does the plot follow a familiar pattern or does it deviate from the expected?

Characters

Who is the protagonist and who is the antagonist? How do the different characters fit into the plot? What purpose do they serve?

Setting

Where and when is the story set? What is the significance of the setting? Why did the writer choose it?

Point of View

Who is telling the story? Is it a first or a third person narrative? Is the narrator omniscient? Does the narrator seem like a straight shooter, or are there indications that the reader is being deliberately misled?

Imagery

What is the meaning of the images in the story? What do they tell us about the characters and the action?

Symbolism

What symbols can be found in the story? What are the symbols supposed to convey to the reader?

Tone

How would you characterize the general manner of the piece? Is it humorous? Scary? Thoughtful? Sober? How does the writer convey tone? Does the tone change anywhere in the story?

Irony

Does the story employ irony? What is the effect on the reader?

Theme

What is the underlying idea of the story? How do the specific details imply a notion of human understanding?

Working Toward a Thesis Statement

Now that you have looked at some general questions, consider some specific questions that may lead to good thesis statements regarding Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings."

Read the story here:

"A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings"

What does the winged old man signify?

How does his scraggly appearance compare with other winged literary figures?

Is the old man an angel?

What does one make of the villagers' reactions to the old man?

How does Marquez employ irony, and what does it tell us about ourselves?

What is the story's tone? How does Marquez convey the tone?

What is the significance of the church's response to the old man?

What is the overall effect of the story?

By answering these questions, it becomes possible to find a good topic for discussion in an essay. For the sake of this example, the first question will be discussed by first formulating a thesis statement that will allow you to explore the answer:

Thesis: Although the old man is clearly a supernatural being, he defies the villager's expectations of what an angel should be like and thus becomes the object of their superstition and ignorance.

While not too bad, the above thesis appears to invite too much plot summary and should probably be revised:

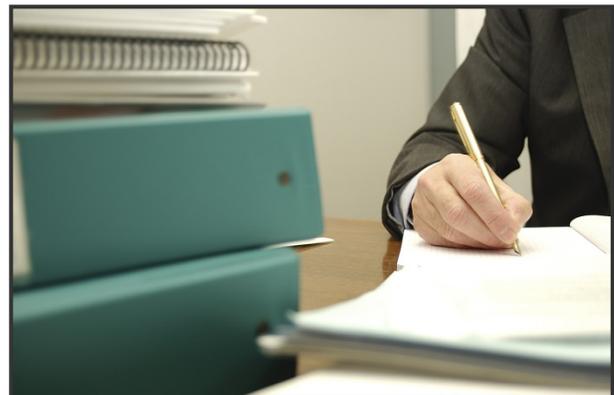
Thesis: The old man is a metaphor for difference, and the villagers' attitude toward him illustrates the attitude people often have toward those who are unlike themselves.

This thesis is definitely better. It examines the old man as a metaphor and muses on his purpose.

Focusing on an aspect of the story, rather than on the entire idea, will allow you to go into detail and avoid plot summary. When researching, it will allow you to focus your search around particular key words, and you will be able to test your thesis against other people's ideas. Some ideas may be used in support of your thesis, while it may be necessary to refute others.

Once you create a workable thesis statement, you will need to seek textual evidence in the story to back up your ideas. It would be a good idea to create an outline for your essay as you work through this process.

Once your outline is complete, and you believe you can show your thesis using examples from the text, do some research and see what other critics have to say about your topic. You don't need to focus solely on critics with whom you agree. You can also show how critics may be misreading the text.



Keep all of your research straight by creating a bibliography. Put everything you might use in the bibliography, but only cite the sources you actually use in your paper on your Works Cited page. Many people like to annotate their bibliographies by following each citation with a brief description of its contents and its potential usefulness.

When writing your first draft, hold back on integrating your research until the draft is complete. That way, the essay will be about your ideas, and the research can be used to support them.