

英语现代短篇小说

阅读与理解

**MODERN ENGLISH
SHORT STORIES**

Reading and Comprehension

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INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING THE SHORT STORY

A short story is not a story that happens to be short. To identify it by the length from 2500 to 10,000 is insignificant. The short story is not merely a relatively brief fictional narrative in prose, but the result of conscious craftsmanship and artistic skill. It is distinguished from the sketch or the tale in that it has a firmness in construction and finds a unity in many things apart from plot, in effect, theme, character, tone, mood, even in style. It is also distinguished from the novel; it tends to reveal a character through a series of actions or by putting him under stress, rather than show character developing as a result of actions and under the impact of events. Ever since it came into being as a separate literary genre, the short story has been a form of great vitality and flexibility. There has been the "unified effect" tale of Poe, the "surprising-ending" story of Maupassant and O. Henry, the "slice of life" story of Chekhov and Katherine Mansfield, and the symbolic and mysterious story of today. With its rapid development in this century, the short story has become an increasingly demanding art to understand and comprehend. A brief survey of this literary form may therefore prove to be necessary.

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT

The short story may be the oldest kind of fiction and also the newest kind to be recognized as a separate literary genre. Story-telling, inherent in the human need and desire to communicate, goes back to prehistory. Long before man could write to

express his experiences and aspirations, he had told stories in the spoken language. We can well imagine the cave men, after fishing or hunting a whole day, would sit around the fire, telling each other their exciting experiences, or they might make some marks on the walls to help retain them in their memory. Primitive as they were, these recounting of experiences and marking down of events contained the seeds of the story.

The earliest recorded tales extant were an Egyptian collection. Tales of the Magicians. These tales were composed on papyrus. They were told to entertain King Cheops by his sons "The Shipwrecked Sailor" and "The Doomed Prince" are the best known of them.

The Hebrews told stories not merely for entertainment. Their stories had a purpose and usually taught religious lessons. Three hundred years before the birth of Christ, there were the parables of the Old Testament, such as the Book of Ruth and the Book of Jonah. Then Christ spoke in parables, such as The Prodigal Son, which were later collected in The New Testament. Ancient Hindu fables, collected in the Panchatantra, were also primitive stories, and so were early Greek and Roman tales, legends and myths.

The Middle Ages were a time for the proliferation of stories. The short tales became an important means of diversion and amusement. There were the Arabian Nights stories, the fables about beasts, and the medieval romances. In England about 1250, some two hundred tales were collected in the Gesta Ramanorum. Among the tales and various episodes in long works of fiction, there were Boccaccio's Decameron, Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, Malory's Le Morte Darther, etc.

The 17th and 18th centuries saw a temporary decline of the short story. With the coming of the Renaissance and later the Enlightenment, an awakening concern with secular issues called for a new demand on actual conditions. The amusing stories of the Middle Ages became no longer relevant nor viable. Wh drama and poetry became the favourite forms in the Renaissance.

journals and pamphlets responded to the interests of new attention in the Enlightenment. But in the 18th century, the new-emerged periodical publications did the story a good turn. In such publications as *The Spectator* and *The Tatler* by Addison and Steels, and *The Rambler* by Samuel Johnson, some of the essays, light in tone, were presented in the form of a fictitious tale with characters vividly portrayed. Addison's *Sir Roger de Coverley* sketches were typical examples.

As a literary form we know it today, however, the short story obviously originated in the 19th century with a number of writers. Among them the most noticeable were Edgar Allan Poe, Guy de Maupassant, Anton Chekhov and Henry James.

Edgar Allan Poe is regarded by some as the father of the short story. It is not only because he skillfully constructed some tales himself, but because he was the first to formulate some principles for the short story. In his 1842 review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, Poe maintained that a story must have "a certain unique or single effect"; ~~it must be short enough to be read at one sitting, it must have a unity of tone—~~ all elements in it must be consistent with an relevant to a "pre-established design"; and the short story should aim at truth in the portrayal of life and characters. With these fundamental rules laid down, the short story began to take shape.

It is said that once, Gustave Flaubert, in giving advice about literary writing to Guy de Maupassant, said, "In order to describe a fire or a tree, you must remain face to face with them till they no longer resemble any other fire or tree. This is the way to become original. Study the commonplace in such a way that you will cease to be commonplace." Maupassant took the advice and, through practice, learned the use of concrete details and sense impressions. Thus he gave the short story individuality and made it convincing.

Another significant contribution was made by a Russian writer, Anton Chekhov. He presented the hero of the story at a critical moment in life, laying stress on the revealing moment

rather than the structure of action. Chekhov believed that the character's internal conflict is more revealing than the external action that produced it.

Henry James, an American novelist and short story writer, exercised his influence on the art of short story through his stories and criticisms. He suggested some rules for the short story: A story must achieve "the air of reality (solidity of specification)", a refinement of what Maupassant learned from Flaubert; character must determine action and in turn must be revealed by action so as to form an organic interrelationship. Another important aspect in the art of writing a story he proposed, is "the post of observation" or the point of view from which the story is told.

Other 19th century authors who also made their contributions to the development of the short story were Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Bret Harte, and Stephen Crane in the United States; E.T.W. Hoffmann, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, and Johann Ludwig Tieck in Germany; Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol in Russia; Prosper Merimée, Honoré de Balzac, and Théophile Gautier in France; Robert Louis Stevenson and Rudyard Kipling in England

With the clear concept and techniques made known and actively practised, the short story has come a long way from its primitive prototypes to the maturity of a modern separate literary genre. In the 20th century, adapted and furthered by many masters of fiction, the short story has continued to develop. It has become a dynamic art, probably the most flexible and versatile of all literary forms.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SHORT STORY

Character and Ways to Recognize Him

Fiction appeals to us mainly because it is concerned with human beings. The persons in fiction are called characters. In

the short story, character forms an essential part of the content.

A fictional character, however, is never as complex as the people we see around us. According to E.M. Forster, the characters in a short story are "flat", not "round"¹; that is, they act consistently from a few well-defined traits in the fictitious world of the short story. On the one hand, no writer can develop in a few thousand words a lively, fully fleshed personality, and on the other, a short story uses only those aspects of the character that are required by the given situation. To call a character "flat" is therefore no term of reproach, no indication that he is unreal. As a matter of fact, the simplification of character has a great advantage to both writer and reader "It is", says Forster,² "a convenience for an author when he can strike with his full force at once, and flat characters are very useful to him, since they never need reintroducing, never run away, have not to be watched for development, and provide their own atmosphere . . ."; to the reader, they make themselves immediately identifiable and keep their actions consistent. "Flat" or "round", the more important thing is, the characters must be lifelike and convincing: sufficient in their motivation and consistent in their behaviour.

The number of characters in the short story is generally limited. There is one central character, variously called the protagonist or the hero, and some minor characters. The short story, confined by space, usually delineates only the central character. How much the other characters are portrayed is determined by how much they contribute to a further revelation of the central character, of his motivations and the changes that take place in him. However, if the primary intention of a story is something other than character, none of the characters need be fully portrayed.

1 E. M. Forster: *Aspects of the Novel*. See Chapter 4, people (continued); Pelican Book pp. 75

2 *ibid.* pp. 76

The central character usually changes in the course of the action. The change may be big or small, for better or for worse, but whatever it may be, the change is something basic and important, though some modern stories do not show such a change in the character. If the central character does not change, something else must, either another character or the course of the action. For there must be some kind of change if the story is to have some point. The change unites character and action to effect theme. Without a change of some sort, the narrative is merely a happening rather than a short story. And so, to find and explain the change is the surest way to get to the story's meaning. Take for example, in the story "How Beautiful With Shoes", if Mare remains the same after her frightful experience, the story can hardly stand. But from her change of attitude toward Ruby, we get the clue to the point of the story.

The means through which an author usually creates his character give the reader clues to recognize and evaluate the character in the story.

Action

Just as we judge people in actual life by their deeds, so we observe the character in a story by the way he acts, particularly in a crucial situation. Through action, we learn most about a character, because action puts him to the test, brings his strength into full play as well as exposes his weakness. Action and character forms an organic interrelationship.

Dialogue

Like action, dialogue is a decisive factor in characterization. In addition to showing such things as age, nationality, education, dialogue can reveal habits of mind and the character's reaction to people and events. If we listen to the conversation in the opening scene of Hemingway's *The Killers*, we quickly discover the two strangers eating in Henry's lunchroom are cold-blooded and vicious guys.

Thoughts

Presenting a character's thoughts is a very important means of revelation. The author creates the character and he can make him disclose the secrets of his heart and reveal his motivating force that drives him in action. This may be done in the form of monologue, reflection or confession. Sometimes it is effected by the information about a character's attitude towards life, his faith, his standard of right and wrong, his beliefs regarding man's relationship to society, to God and to the universe.

Explanation

Direct characterization often happens when the author adopts an omniscient point of view. In this case, the author may come out to make some outright statements about his character, instead of showing him in action, listening to him talk, following his thoughts, or leaving the reader to his own judgement. The direct method, however, is generally supported by the indirect. The reader must be shown, as well told. This device is no longer popular in the modern short stories.

Environment

Description of character's surroundings, particularly those the author deliberately chooses, contributes much to an understanding of the character. Mare, in "How Beautiful With Shoes", is characterized by her environment. Living on a farm, close to the soil, she is a farm girl who knows the elemental things. This accounts for her slow-mindedness and lack of sophistication. It is not surprising, therefore, that she handles Jewett, the mentally sick man, as she would handle a sick animal. A more significant clue in this connection is the character's reaction to his environment. In Willa Cather's *Paul's Case*. Paul's overwhelming distaste for the commonplace quality of his home, his contempt for his teachers in the high school, his reveling in the artificial glitter of the theatrical — all this gives us a clue to what Paul is like.

Description

Although details of appearance are more often a means of identification than a means of revealing personality, an author's deliberate description of his character's physique, facial features, clothes, mannerisms, gestures, or the way of speaking, generally contributes to the understanding of the character's personality.

There are, of course, still other means to recognize a character. For instance, a character's name may tell us a lot. A nickname, in particular, tells us more about the character if it is associated with his personal characteristics.

Plot, or the Structure of Action

An author presents his characters in action, but he often finds it necessary to violate the strictly logical and chronological order of action. While manipulating the action in a way he plans, the author is creating his plot. Thus, the two terms "plot" and "action", closely interrelated as they are, are not one and the same thing. We may roughly say that action is the raw material of plot, and plot is the final shaping of action or action as we find it projected into a story. Plot is important for what it reveals. A mature reader reads not merely for plot, but mainly for revelation of character or life that is presented by means of plot. Plot is inextricable from character and the total meaning of the story.

The usual sequence of action is logical and chronological. The beginning of action in a story is the exposition. It provides the reader with some necessary information or some background knowledge, such as facts of time, place, persons, the preliminary condition of affairs, etc. The middle of action is the development. It starts with the complication, in which an inciting force or incident crops up, bearing vital importance to the central character as it creates a problem or places the central character in a conflict. With the development of the conflict, a change either in the character, or in the direction of action, will take place. The moment of the actual change is the turning point or

climax. The end of action is the denouement, a solution to the problem or the conflict.

While the action line, on the basis of cause and effect, is the customary course of exposition, complication, conflict, climax and denouement, the sequence of plot may vary from story to story. The writer may distort the logical order of action. For instance, he may start in the middle and go back to the beginning through a flashback. So the best way to analyse the structure of a story is not to identify those divisions, but to note what the conflict is.

Conflict may be external, when the central character is engaged in a struggle against other people, society, nature or fate; it may be internal, when he is struggling with some element in his own nature. The nature of conflict may be physical, mental, emotional or moral. In some stories, the conflict is single, clear-cut and easily identifiable; in others, multiple, various and subtle. The analysis of a story through its central conflict is very fruitful. By tracing what causes it, how it is resolved, and how it is worked out in terms of action, we come to the true issue of the story.

Action is generally presented in one of the two ways: by means of a summary or by means of a scene. A summary, or panorama as Percy Lubbock called it in *The Craft of Fiction*, is a narrative of events related in general terms, in which the reader is told what happens. It is capable of covering a good deal of ground and time in a few words and is often used as a link between scenes. When Steels writes in *How Beautiful With Shoes*:

“Ruby went home, but Older Haskins stayed to supper with them, and helped Marc do the dishes afterward; it was nearly nine when he left”.

This is a summary. We don't see what takes place, but are told what happens; hours of time are covered in one sentence. A scene, on the contrary, is an episode limited in time and space, with the action slowed down so much so that the reader can watch it take place as if right in front of him. Scenes are like

close-ups. In the above-quoted story, following the summary sentence a scene begins:

The mother was already in bed, and Mare was about to sit down to get those shoes off her wretched feet at last, when she heard the cow carrying on up at the barn, lowing and kicking, and the next minute the sow was in it with a horning note. It might be a fox passing by to get at the hen-house, or a weasel. Mare forgot her feet, took a broom-handle they used in boiling clothes, opened the back door, and stepped out. Blinking the lamp-light from her eyes, she peered up toward the outbuildings, and saw the gable end of the barn standing like a red arrow in the dark, and the top of a butternut tree beyond it drawn in skeleton traceries, and just then a cook crowed.

This is the beginning of a scene that goes on for a few pages. Here the reader is given a chance for close observation, seeing Mare start to sit down, listen to the farm animals, conclude that they are merely disturbed, pick up a broomhandle, go to the door, step outside, look toward the barn — all this presents a close-up scene to the reader's eyes. While the summary sentence in twenty-five words covers several hours, this portion of the scene covers just several minutes in about one hundred and thirty-five words.

Point of View

Point of view is the author's selection of a narrator, the angle from which the story is narrated, or the author's vision through which we view the characters and the action. It decides the relationships between the author, the story and the reader, and accounts for the selections as to where the reader goes, what he sees, and whose consciousness he shares. The author chooses what seems to him the most effective vantage point, the one most likely to draw the reader into the emotional pull of his imaginative world. In doing so, he has a variety of choices:

1. Omniscient Point of View

This point of view enables the author to tell the story from his own vantage point, referring to the character as "he" or "she". As the word "omniscient" implies, the narrator knows everything and sees all. He may tell what any or all of the characters do, see, think, or even relate events of which none of them have knowledge. He may freely make asides, interpret behaviour, comment on the action, even come forward to address the reader.

Sanctioned by long custom in story-telling, this point of view makes it possible for the author to move freely and give the reader a broad scope of human life. But it has obvious disadvantages. If not handled skillfully, it may result in a lack of focus; it runs the risk of separating the reader from the world of the story, thus keeping the reader in a passive position to be always told. Besides, this point of view runs contrary to experience, for in actual life, everyone is limited to the testimony of his own senses and the working of his own mind. Therefore modern writers tend to avoid it, or at least modify it in their hands as D.H. Lawrence does in *The Rocking-Horse Winner*.

2. Dramatic Point of View

At the opposite extreme of omniscience is the dramatic point of view. The author presents action in a purely objective manner, as if he were a television cameraman, making an objective report. The unidentified author refers to his characters in the third person, and relates, as an observer, only those that come to him through his senses. He makes no comments nor enters the mind of any of the characters. It is much like a play: all action, dialogue, setting, stage directions. As a result, this method is very demanding to the reader, for he has nothing to guide his interpretation of the action. The motivation of the characters has to be inferred entirely by external observations. Hemingway uses it in many of his early stories; *The Killers* and "Hills Like White Elephants" are typical examples.

3. Personal Point of View

Between these two extremes is the personal point of view. The author does not pretend to see all, to know and tell all (omniscient), nor is he an outside observer, watching the action like one sitting in a theatre (dramatic). Instead, he identifies himself with one of the characters and tells the story as it appears to him. He may tell it in the first person or the third person.

(1) **Third-Person Point of View.** The most commonly used is the third-person point of view. The reader follows the action through the eye and mind of one of the characters, usually the central character. This method provides a double vision. The reader not only observes the central character, he is also involved with the character's feelings and thoughts. While the author screens himself out of the story by identifying with this third-person narrator, the reader is led into the emotional centre of the story. He does not only look on, but also share the experience as the narrator does it — a vicarious experience, one of the lasting pleasures in reading fiction.

(2) **First-Person Point of View.** This point of view seems most natural, as though the reader were recounting his own experience. It carries an air of immediacy, intimacy and reality, and it reads like an autobiography, though the reader must be careful not to always identify the "I" with the author.

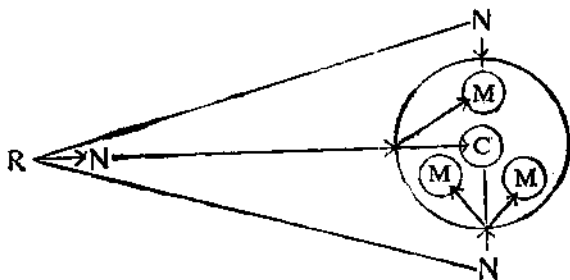
If the narrator identifies himself with the central character in the story, the point of view is the first-person central. The narrator tells the story in his own words — what he thinks, feels, does, and what and whom he observes. As a result, the story which filters through to the reader may sound biased, because an individual telling his own story cannot be always objective. He may overrate himself or be overmodest. This point of view, however, carries a strong sense of authority and authenticity.

If a minor character is identified by the narrator, the point of view is the first-person minor. The narrator is merely an outsider who happens to know the main action. Through his

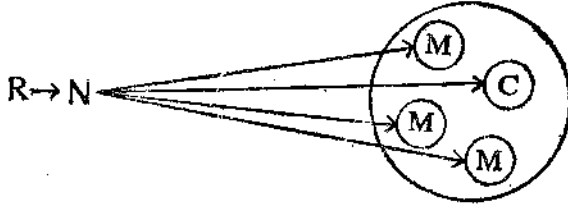
eyes and consciousness the reader sees the action unfolding. It seems to be very objective, but as an outsider, the narrator may either see most of the game, or, confined by his various limitations, he may not fully realize what he is recounting. This handicap, however, leaves room for the reader to make his own judgement.

The above-discussed points of view can be illustrated in the following diagrams. In each diagram, the large circle represents the imagined world of the story. N stands for the narrator, R the reader, C the central character, M a minor character. The characters are represented by small circles. The lines represent the relationships among reader, narrator, central and minor characters. When a line penetrates a small circle, it indicates that the reader can enter the very thoughts of the character represented by the circle.

Omniscient Point of View, or Third-Person Omniscient.

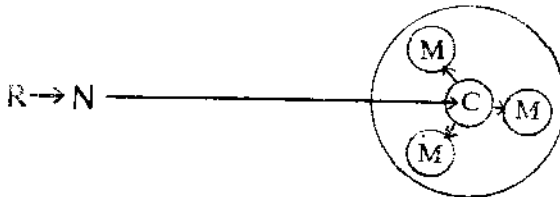


The reader is led into the world of the story by the third-person narrator, who can move freely within, around or above the world. He knows all, describes the actions and gives observations of the central and minor characters. He may enter their thoughts and feelings. He may also reveal information that none of the characters could know.

 Dramatic Point of View, or Third-Person Limited


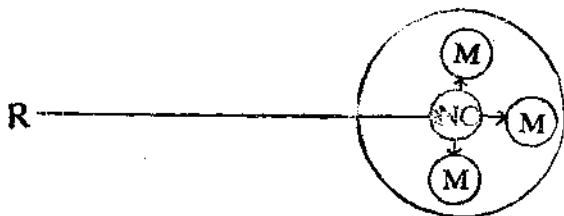
The reader is led by the third-person unidentified narrator into the world of the story to observe objectively only the external actions of the central and minor characters. The narrator reports only. He makes no comment, nor states the thoughts or feelings of the characters. This method is highly objective and dramatic, leaving the interpretation and judgment entirely to the reader.

Third-Person Central



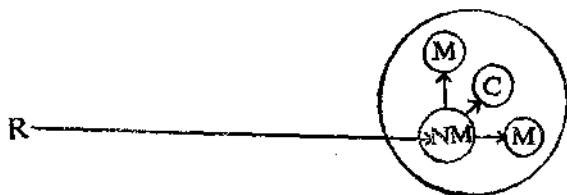
The reader is led by the narrator not only into the world of the story, but also into the mind of the central character, sharing his thoughts and feelings. However, the reader's knowledge is confined to what the central character can know and understand. This method acquires a sense of both intimacy and objectivity.

First-Person Central



The narrator identifies himself with the first-person central character. The reader is led into not only the world of the story but also the mind of the central character. This creates the illusion that the story is the reader's. The reader naturally shares the thoughts, feelings and actions of the central character, and observes what is happening around him.

First-Person Minor



The narrator identifies himself with one of the minor characters in the first person. The reader is led into not only the world of the story but also the mind of the first-person minor character. It is through him the central character's story and the external actions are told and observed. This method is objective, external, and dramatic.