

INTERMEDIATE WRITING

SHORT STORY

MEIYANTI NURCHAERANI S.S., M.HUM

UNIVERSITAS ESA UNGGUL

JAKARTA

A short story

It was Katia's 20th birthday and she was looking forward to seeing her friends. They were meeting at *Mamma Mia's*, her favourite Italian restaurant, for a special birthday dinner. Katia was excited and got to the restaurant at exactly 7 o'clock, the time they had arranged to meet. She looked around for a familiar face, but no one had arrived yet. So she decided to wait outside and stood patiently in the warm evening sunshine.

The restaurant quickly filled up with customers, but none of them were Katia's friends. 'Where are they?' she thought. At half past seven she was still waiting, so she called her best friend Isa. 'Why doesn't she answer her phone?' Katia asked herself. Then she called Jonty, Alex and Yoko, but they didn't answer either. 'What's going on?' she wondered.

At 8 o'clock Katia went home. Her friends had forgotten her birthday and she felt lonely and miserable. She opened the front door and walked into the dark house. The living room door was closed. 'How strange,' she thought because she always left it open. Nervously, she opened the door. Suddenly the lights went on and all her friends jumped up and shouted 'Surprise!' So they hadn't forgotten and in the end it was the best birthday ever.

When you write a story, use ...

the past simple, past continuous and the past perfect.

adjectives and adverbs.

direct speech with reporting verbs and punctuation.

discourse markers e.g. *then, after that or in the end.*

SHORT STORY

What is a definition of short story?

A short story is fictional work of prose that is shorter in length than a novel. Edgar Allan Poe, in his essay "The Philosophy of Composition," said that a short story should be read in one sitting, anywhere from a half hour to two hours. In contemporary fiction, a short story can range from 1,000 to 20,000 words.

Because of the shorter length, a short story usually focuses on one plot, one main character (with a few additional minor characters), and one central theme, whereas a novel can tackle multiple plots and themes, with a variety of prominent characters. Short stories also lend themselves more to experimentation — that is, using uncommon prose styles or literary devices to tell the story. Such uncommon styles or devices might get tedious, and downright annoying, in a novel, but they may work well in a short story.

For Short Story Month, we asked: What, exactly, is a short story? How is different from the novel? How can a definition help you to construct a piece, help you to decide whether your fiction is short or long?

We've collected some definitions from writers. See which ones speak to you.

“If the novel is like an intricate Renaissance painting, the short story is an impressionist painting. It should be an explosion of truth. Its strength lies in what it leaves out just as much as what it puts in, if not more. It is concerned with the total exclusion of meaninglessness. Life, on the other hand, is meaningless most of the time. The novel imitates life, where the short story is bony, and cannot wander. It is essential art.”

William Trevor, [The Art of Fiction, No. 108, The Paris Review](#)

“My stories and my poems are both short. (Laughs.) I write them the same way, and I’d say the effects are similar. There’s a compression of language, of emotion, that isn’t to be found in the novel. The short story and the poem, I’ve often said, are closer to each other than the short story and the novel.”

Raymond Carver, [Two Interviews with Raymond Carver](#)

“The short story needs to get to the point or the question of the point or the question of its several points and then flip things upside down. It makes skepticism into an art form. It has a deeper but narrower mission than longer narratives, one that requires drilling down rather than lighting out. Like poetry, it takes care with every line. Like a play, it moves in a deliberate fashion, scene by scene. Although a story may want to be pungent and real and sizzling, still there should be as little fat as possible.”

Lorris Moore, [Why We Read \(and Write\) Short Stories](#)

“Perhaps the central question to be considered in any discussion of the short story is what do we mean by short. Being short does not mean being slight. A short story should be long in depth and should give us an experience of meaning...A story is a way to say something that can’t be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate. When anybody asks what a story is about, the only proper thing is to tell him to read the story. The meaning of fiction is not abstract meaning but experienced meaning, and the purpose of making statement about the meaning of a story is only to help you to experience that meaning more fully.”

Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*

“Something happens, however slight it may be—and it isn’t something that happened over and over before and is going to happen again and again in the future. It is assumed that the events of a story take place only once, that whatever “happens” to the character as a result of the action of the story alters or “moves” him in such a way, again however slight it may be, that he would never experience or do the same thing in exactly the same way.”

Rust Hills, *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular*

“In a story that’s complete, enough happens—however slight the incidents may be—that we don’t know the end and want to know the end. There is enough new incident not necessarily to change a character (some people never change) but to change the reader: we start someplace, go a distance, and return, or go a distance and arrive. Sometimes the character changes, but in a complete story the reader always changes—if only changing position: we lean back, saying, “Ahhh.” Or we sit up straight near the end, realize we were wrong, and relax again. Or we sag in our chairs, a little bored, thinking we see what the author is up to—and then sit up with a jerk. We go through something.”

Alice Mattison, *The Kite and the String*

“A story is not like a road to follow ... it’s more like a house. You go inside and stay there for a while, wandering back and forth and settling where you like and discovering how the room and corridors relate to each other, how the world outside is altered by being viewed from these windows. And you, the visitor, the reader, are altered as well by being in this enclosed space, whether it is ample and easy or full of crooked turns, or sparsely or opulently furnished. You can go back again and again, and the house, the story, always contains more than you saw the last time. It also has a sturdy sense of itself of being built out of its own necessity, not just to shelter or beguile you.”

Alice Munro, *Selected Stories*

“Both a novel and a story are maps of life, of course, and distort the world by amplifying selected details. The novel’s ambition is to create a world from the ground up, while a story grinds the earth down to its atoms. The world of the novel is a moon, a satellite, of the one we inhabit. The world of the story is an impulse, scrambled pixels, bounced over the horizon, sorting themselves out on the screen of the retina.

Novels murder and create. Stories are the scenes of crimes.”

Michael Martone, “Ruining a Story”

“In short stories, I don’t think characters or their situation or their surrounding *change* as frequently as they *turn*.”

Meg Wolitzer, *The Best American Short Stories 2017*

Instructor: *Joshua Wimmer*

Joshua holds a master's degree in Latin and has taught a variety of Classical literature and language courses.

We've all read short stories, such as 'A Country Doctor' by Franz Kafka or Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart.' In this lesson, you'll learn more about the characteristics of the short story and explore some noteworthy examples by American and European writers.

Definition

A **short story** typically takes the form of a brief fictional work, usually written in prose. The earliest precursors to the short story can be found in the oral storytelling tradition, as well as episodes from ancient Mediterranean epics, such as 'The Epic of Gilgamesh' and Homer's 'Iliad.'

Anecdotes, fables, fairy tales, and parables are all examples of the oral storytelling tradition that helped to shape the short story, such as 'The Painting of the Dog and His Reflection' from 'Aesop's Fables'. In fact, '**Aesop's Fables**,' first collected in the 4th century B.C., may have been the first anthology of short stories in Western literature.

Over time, genres and writers all around the world have influenced the development of the short story. For example, Norse legends, Irish ballads, and Gothic ghost stories have all played a major role in directing both its structure and subject matter. Let's take a look at some of the major characteristics of the short story.

Characteristics

Length: Short stories typically range from 1,600 to 20,000 words.

Although authors and critics have debated the length of the short story throughout literary history, most agree on a minimum of 1,600 and a maximum of 20,000 words. In his own contribution to the debate, **Edgar Allen Poe** suggested that a short story should take 30 minutes to two hours to read.

Subject: Short stories usually focus on a single subject or theme.

Subjects or themes may range from something as mundane as a daily errand or as thrilling as a ghost tale. A single, easily contained plot is one of the hallmarks of the short story and helps shape its other characteristics.

'In medias res': Short stories usually take place in a single setting and begin 'in medias res', which means 'into the middle of things' in Latin.

In general, short stories tend to begin and end abruptly, with little to no prior information and no major lapses in time. As they involve just one plot line and are limited in word length, there is little room or need for the extended developments we frequently find in novels.

Limited number of characters: Due to the limitations of the genre, short stories typically focus on just one or a couple characters.

As short stories usually cover such brief periods of time, even a single character may never be fully developed. However, historical examples, like some of Geoffrey Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales,' may find interesting ways of involving many different people, as we'll discuss next.

Examples

'Canterbury Tales'

5 Important Elements of a Short Story

A short story is a short work of fiction. Fiction, as you know, is prose writing about imagined events and characters. Prose writing differs from poetry in that it does not depend on verses, meters or rhymes for its organization and presentation.

Novels are another example of fictional prose and are much longer than short stories. Some short stories, however, can be quite long. If a short story is a long one, say fifty to one hundred pages, we call it a novella.

American literature contains some of the world's best examples of the short story. Readers around the world enjoy the finely crafted stories of American writers such as O. Henry, Stephen Crane, Jack London, Mark Twain and Edgar Allen Poe.

What makes these authors such remarkable short story writers? They are true masters at combining the five key elements that go into every great short story: **character, setting, conflict, plot** and **theme**.

The ELLSA web-site uses one of these five key elements as the focus of each of the five on-line lessons in the Classics of American Literature section. In each lesson, you will explore a single American short story from the USIA Ladder Series and discover how the author uses a certain element.

The definitions on the right are repeated on the first page of each short story lesson.



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March 22, 2004

Character

A character is a person, or sometimes even an animal, who takes part in the action of a short story or other literary work.

see **The Green Door** by **O. Henry**

Setting

The setting of a short story is the time and place in which it happens. Authors often use descriptions of landscape, scenery, buildings, seasons or weather to provide a strong sense of setting.

see **The Last Leaf** by **O. Henry**

Plot

A plot is a series of events and character actions that relate to the central conflict.

see **The Open Boat** by **Stephen Crane**

Conflict

The conflict is a struggle between two people or things in a short story. The main character is usually on one side of the central conflict.

On the other side, the main character may struggle against another important character, against the forces of nature, against society, or even against something inside himself or herself (feelings, emotions, illness).

see **To Build a Fire** by **Jack London**

Theme

The theme is the central idea or belief in a short story.

see **The Gift of the Magi** by O. Henry

The short story is usually concerned with a single effect conveyed in only one or a few significant episodes or scenes. The form encourages economy of [setting](#), concise narrative, and the omission of a complex [plot](#); character is disclosed in action and dramatic encounter but is seldom fully developed. Despite its relatively limited scope, though, a short story is often judged by its ability to provide a “complete” or satisfying treatment of its characters and subject.

Before the 19th century the short story was not generally regarded as a distinct [literary](#) form. But although in this sense it may seem to be a uniquely modern [genre](#), the fact is that short prose [fiction](#) is nearly as old as language itself. Throughout history humankind has enjoyed various types of brief narratives: jests, [anecdotes](#), studied [digressions](#), short allegorical romances, moralizing fairy tales, short [myths](#), and abbreviated historical [legends](#). None of these [constitutes](#) a short story as it has been defined since the 19th century, but they do make up a large part of the [milieu](#) from which the modern short story emerged.

[Read More on This Topic](#)



[Arabic literature: The short story](#)

[While the **short story** was not the first fictional genre to make its appearance during the course of the 19th century, it certainly was the first to adapt itself to a new cultural environment, as writers set about using it as a means...](#)

Analysis of the genre

As a [genre](#), the short story received relatively little critical attention through the middle of the 20th century, and the most valuable studies of the form were often limited by region or era. In his *The Lonely Voice* (1963), the Irish short story writer [Frank O'Connor](#) attempted to account for the genre by suggesting that stories are a means for “submerged population groups” to address a dominating [community](#). Most other theoretical discussions, however, were [predicated](#) in one way or another on [Edgar Allan Poe](#)’s thesis that stories must have a compact unified effect.

By far the majority of [criticism](#) on the short story focused on techniques of writing. Many, and often the best of the technical works, advise the young reader—alerting the reader to the variety of devices and tactics employed by the skilled writer. On the other hand, many of these works are no more than [treatises](#) on “how to write stories” for the young writer rather than serious critical material.

The prevalence in the 19th century of two words, “[sketch](#)” and “tale,” affords one way of looking at the genre. In the United States alone there were virtually hundreds of books claiming to be collections of sketches ([Washington Irving](#)’s *The Sketch Book*, [William Dean Howells](#)’s *Suburban Sketches*) or collections of tales (Poe’s *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, [Herman Melville](#)’s *The Piazza Tales*). These two terms establish the polarities of the milieu out of which the modern short story grew.

The [tale](#) is much older than the sketch. Basically, the tale is a [manifestation](#) of a culture’s unaging desire to name and conceptualize its place in the cosmos. It provides a culture’s narrative framework for such things as its vision of itself and its homeland or for expressing its [conception](#) of its ancestors and its gods. Usually filled with cryptic and uniquely [deployed](#) motifs, personages, and [symbols](#), tales are frequently fully understood only by members of the particular [culture](#) to which they belong. Simply, tales are intracultural. Seldom created to address an outside culture, a tale is a medium through which a culture speaks to itself and thus perpetuates its own values and stabilizes its own identity. The old speak to the young through tales.

The sketch, by contrast, is intercultural, depicting some phenomenon of one culture for the benefit or pleasure of a second culture. Factual and journalistic, in essence the sketch is generally more [analytic](#) or descriptive and less narrative or dramatic than the tale. Moreover, the sketch by nature is *suggestive*, incomplete; the tale is often *hyperbolic*, overstated.

The primary [mode](#) of the sketch is written; that of the tale, [spoken](#). This difference alone accounts for their strikingly different effects. The sketch writer can have, or pretend to have, his eye on his subject. The tale, recounted at court or campfire—or at some place similarly removed in time from the event—is nearly always a re-creation of the past. The tale-teller is an agent of *time*, bringing together a culture’s past and its present. The sketch writer is more an agent of *space*, bringing an aspect of one culture to the attention of a second.

It is only a slight oversimplification to suggest that the tale was the only kind of short fiction until the 16th century, when a rising middle class interest in social [realism](#) on the one hand and in exotic lands on the other put a premium on sketches of subcultures and foreign regions. In the 19th century certain writers—those one might call the “fathers” of the modern story: [Nikolay Gogol](#), Hawthorne, [E.T.A. Hoffmann](#), [Heinrich von Kleist](#), [Prosper Mérimée](#), Poe—combined elements of the tale with elements of the sketch. Each writer worked in his own way, but the general effect was to [mitigate](#) some of the [fantasy](#) and stultifying conventionality of the tale and, at the same time, to liberate the sketch from its bondage to strict factuality. The modern short story, then, ranges between the highly imaginative tale and the photographic sketch and in some ways draws on both.

The short stories of [Ernest Hemingway](#), for example, may often gain their force from an exploitation of traditional mythic symbols (water, fish, groin wounds), but they are more closely related to the sketch than to the tale. Indeed, Hemingway was able at times to submit his apparently factual stories as newspaper copy. In contrast, the stories of Hemingway’s contemporary [William Faulkner](#) more closely resemble the tale. Faulkner seldom seems to understate, and his stories carry a heavy flavour of the past. Both his language and his subject matter are rich in traditional material. A Southerner might well suspect that only a reader steeped in sympathetic knowledge of the traditional South could fully understand Faulkner. Faulkner may seem, at times, to be a Southerner speaking to and for Southerners. But, as, by virtue of their imaginative and symbolic qualities, Hemingway’s narratives are more than journalistic sketches, so, by virtue of their explorative and analytic qualities, Faulkner’s narratives are more than Southern tales.



Britannica Classic: A Discussion of Ernest Hemingway's "My Old Man" Author, professor, and editor Blake Nevius examining “My Old Man,” by Ernest Hemingway, in this 1970 production of the Encyclopædia Britannica Educational Corporation. *Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*

Whether or not one sees the modern short story as a fusion of sketch and tale, it is hardly disputable that today the short story is a distinct and [autonomous](#), though still developing, genre.

History

Origins

The evolution of the short story first began before humans could write. To aid in constructing and memorizing tales, the early [storyteller](#) often relied on stock phrases, fixed rhythms, and [rhyme](#). Consequently, many of the oldest narratives in the world, such as the ancient Babylonian tale the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, are in verse. Indeed, most major stories from the ancient [Middle East](#) were in verse: “The War of the Gods,” “The Story of Adapa” (both Babylonian), “The Heavenly Bow,” and “The King Who Forgot” (both Canaanite). Those tales were inscribed in [cuneiform](#) on clay during the 2nd millennium bce.

From [Egypt](#) to India

The earliest tales [extant](#) from [Egypt](#) were composed on papyrus at a comparable date. The ancient Egyptians seem to have written their narratives largely in prose, apparently reserving verse for their religious hymns and working songs. One of the earliest surviving Egyptian tales, “The Shipwrecked Sailor” (c. 2000 bce), is clearly intended to be a consoling and inspiring story to reassure its aristocratic audience that apparent misfortune can in the end become good fortune. Also recorded during the 12th [dynasty](#) were the success story of the exile Sinuhe and the [moralizing tale](#) called “King Cheops [Khufu] and the Magicians.” The provocative and profusely detailed story “The Tale of Two Brothers” (or “Anpu and Bata”) was written down during the New Kingdom, probably around 1250 bce. Of all the early Egyptian tales, most of which are baldly [didactic](#), this story is perhaps the richest in folk motifs and the most intricate in plot.

The earliest tales from [India](#) are not as old as those from Egypt and the Middle East. The [Brahmanas](#) (c. 900–700 bce) function mostly as theological appendixes to the [Vedas](#), but a few are composed as short instructional parables. Perhaps more interesting as stories are the later tales in the [Pali language](#), the [Jatakas](#). Although these tales have a religious frame that attempts to recast them as Buddhist [ethical](#) teachings, their actual concern is generally with [secular](#) behaviour and practical wisdom. Another, nearly [contemporaneous](#) collection of Indian tales, the *Panchatantra* (c. 100 bce–500 ce), has been one of the world’s most-popular books. This anthology of amusing and moralistic animal tales, akin to those of “[Aesop](#)” in Greece, was translated into Middle Persian in the 6th century; into Arabic in the 8th century; and into [Hebrew](#), Greek, and Latin soon thereafter. [Sir Thomas North](#)’s English translation appeared in 1570. Another noteworthy collection is *Kathasaritsagara* (“Ocean of Rivers of Stories”), a series of tales assembled and recounted in narrative verse in the 11th century by the Sanskrit writer [Somadeva](#). Most of those tales come from much older material, and they vary from the fantastic story of a transformed swan to a more probable tale of a loyal but misunderstood servant.

During the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th centuries bce, the sophisticated narratives that are now a part of the [Hebrew Bible](#) and the [Apocrypha](#) were first written down. The [book of Tobit](#) displays an unprecedented sense of [ironic](#) humour; [Judith](#) creates an unrelenting and suspenseful tension as it builds to its bloody climax; the [story of Susanna](#), the most compact and least fantastic in the Apocrypha, develops a three-sided conflict involving the innocent beauty of Susanna, the lechery of the elders, and the triumphant wisdom of Daniel. The books of [Ruth](#), [Esther](#), and [Jonah](#) hardly

need mentioning to those familiar with [biblical literature](#): they may well be among the most-famous stories in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Nearly all of the ancient tales, whether from Israel, India, Egypt, or the [Middle East](#), were fundamentally [didactic](#). Some of those ancient stories preached by presenting an ideal for readers to imitate. Others tagged with a “moral” were more direct. Most stories, however, preached by illustrating the success and joy that was available to the “good” individual and by conveying a sense of the terror and misery that was in store for the wayward.

[The Greeks](#)

The early Greeks contributed greatly to the scope and art of short fiction. As in India, the moralizing animal [fable](#) was a common form; many of these tales were collected as [Aesop](#)’s fables, the first known collection of which dates to the 4th century bce. Brief [mythological](#) stories of the gods’ adventures in love and war were also popular in the pre-Attic age. [Apollodorus of Athens](#) compiled a handbook of [epitomes](#), or abstracts, of those tales around the 2nd century bce, but the tales themselves are no longer extant in their original form. They appear, though somewhat transformed, in the longer poetical works of [Hesiod](#), [Homer](#), and the tragedians. Short tales found their way into long prose forms as well, as in [Hellanicus](#)’s *Persika* (5th century bce, extant only in fragments).

[Herodotus](#), the “father of history,” saw himself as a maker and reciter of *logoi* (things for telling, tales). His long *History* is interspersed with such fictionalized digressions as the stories of Polycrates and his emerald ring, of Candaules’ attractive wife, and of Rhampsinitus’ stolen treasure. [Xenophon](#)’s philosophical history, the *Cyropaedia* (4th century bce), contains the story of the soldier Abradates and his lovely and loyal wife Panthea, perhaps the first Western love story. The *Cyropaedia* also contains other narrative interpolations: the story of Pheraules, who freely gave away his wealth; the tale of Gobryas’ murdered son; and various anecdotes describing the life of the Persian soldier.

Moreover, the Greeks are usually credited with originating the [romance](#), a long form of prose fiction with stylized plots of love, [catastrophe](#), and reunion. The early Greek romances frequently took shape as a series of short tales. The *Love Romances* of [Parthenius of Nicaea](#), who wrote during the reign of [Augustus Caesar](#), is a collection of 36 prose stories of unhappy lovers. *The Milesian Tales* (no longer extant) was an extremely popular collection of erotic and ribald stories composed by [Aristides of Miletus](#) in the 2nd century bce and translated almost immediately into Latin. As the variety of these short narratives suggests, the Greeks were less insistent than earlier [cultures](#) that short fiction be predominantly didactic.

By comparison the contribution of the [Romans](#) to short narrative was small. [Ovid](#)’s long poem, *Metamorphoses*, is basically a reshaping of over 100 short, popular tales into a thematic pattern. The other major fictional narratives to come out of Rome are novel-length works by [Gaius Petronius Arbiter](#) (*Satyricon*, 1st century ce) and [Lucius Apuleius](#) (*The Golden Ass*, 2nd century ce). Like Ovid those men used potential short story material as episodes within a larger whole. The Roman love of [rhetoric](#), it seems, encouraged the development of longer and more

[comprehensive](#) forms of expression. Regardless, the trend away from didacticism inaugurated by the Greeks was not reversed.

Middle Ages, Renaissance, and after

Proliferation of forms

The Middle Ages in Europe was a time of the proliferation, though not necessarily the refinement, of short narratives. The short tale became an important means of diversion and amusement. From the [medieval](#) era to the Renaissance, various cultures adopted short fiction for their own purposes. Even the aggressive, grim spirit of the invading [Germanic](#) barbarians was [amenable](#) to expression in short prose. The myths and sagas extant in Scandinavia and Iceland indicate the kinds of bleak and violent tales the invaders took with them into southern Europe.

In contrast, the [romantic](#) imagination and high spirits of the [Celts](#) remained [manifest](#) in their tales. Wherever they appeared—in Ireland, Wales, or Brittany—stories steeped in magic and splendour also appeared. This spirit, easily recognized in such [Irish](#) mythological tales as *Longes mac n-Uislenn* (probably 9th-century), infused the chivalric romances that developed somewhat later on the Continent. The romances usually addressed one of three “Matters”: the “Matter of Britain” (stories of King [Arthur](#) and his knights), the “Matter of France” (the [Charlemagne cycle](#)), or the “Matter of Rome” (stories out of antiquity, such as those of [Pyramus and Thisbe](#) and of [Paris and Helen](#)). Many, but not all, of the romances are too long to be considered short stories. Two of the most-influential contributors of short material to the “Matter of Britain” in the 12th century were [Chrétien de Troyes](#) and [Marie de France](#). The latter was gifted as a creator of the short narrative poems known as the [Breton lays](#). Only occasionally did a popular short romance like *Aucassin and Nicolette* (13th century) fail to address any of the three Matters.

Also widely respected was the [exemplum](#), a short didactic tale usually intended to dramatize or otherwise inspire model behaviour. Of all the exempla, the best known in the 11th and 12th centuries were the lives of the saints, some 200 of which are extant. The *Gesta Romanorum* (“Deeds of the Romans”) offered skeletal plots of exempla that preachers could expand into moralistic stories for use in their sermons.

Among the common people of the late Middle Ages there appeared a literary movement counter to that of the romance and exemplum. Displaying a preference for common sense, secular humour, and sensuality, this movement accounted in a large way for the practical-minded animals in [beast fables](#), the coarse and “merry” jestbooks, and the ribald [fabliaux](#). All were important as short narratives, but perhaps the most intriguing of the three are the fabliaux. First appearing around the middle of the 12th century, fabliaux remained popular for 200 years, attracting the attention of Boccaccio and Chaucer. Some 160 fabliaux are extant, all in verse.

Often, the medieval storyteller—regardless of the kind of tale he preferred—relied on a framing circumstance that made possible the [juxtaposition](#) of several stories, each of them relatively autonomous. Since there was little emphasis on organic unity, most storytellers preferred a flexible format, one that allowed tales to be added or removed at random with little change in

effect. Such a format is found in *The Seven Sages of Rome*, a collection of stories so popular that nearly every European country had its own translation. The framing circumstance in *The Seven Sages* involves a prince condemned to death; his advocates (the seven sages) relate a new story each day, thereby delaying the execution until his innocence is made known. This technique is clearly similar to that of *The Thousand and One Nights*, components of which can be dated to as early as the 8th century but which was not translated as a single collection in Europe until the 18th century. The majority of the stories in *The Thousand and One Nights* are framed by the story of Scheherazade. Records indicate that the basis of this framing story was a medieval Persian collection, *Hazārafsāna* (“Thousand Romances,” no longer extant). In both the Persian and Arabian versions of the frame, the clever Scheherazade avoids death by telling her king-husband a thousand stories. Though the framing device is identical in both versions, the original Persian stories within the frame were replaced or drastically altered as the collection was adapted by Arab writers during the Mamlūk period (1250–1517 ce).

Refinement

In Europe, short narrative received its most refined treatment in the Middle Ages from [Geoffrey Chaucer](#) and [Giovanni Boccaccio](#). The versatility Chaucer displays in *The Canterbury Tales* (1387–1400) reflects the versatility of the age. In [“The Miller’s Tale”](#) he artistically combines two fabliaux; in [“The Nun’s Priest’s Tale”](#) he draws upon material common to beast fables; in [“The Pardoner’s Tale”](#) he creates a brilliantly revealing sermon, complete with a narrative exemplum. This short list hardly exhausts the catalogue of forms Chaucer experimented with. By relating tale to teller and by exploiting relationships among the various tellers, Chaucer endowed *The Canterbury Tales* with a unique, dramatic vitality.

[Boccaccio](#)’s genius, geared more toward *narrative* than *drama*, is of a different sort. Where Chaucer reveals a character through actions and assertions, Boccaccio seems more interested in stories as pieces of action. With Boccaccio, the characters telling the stories, and usually the characters within, are of subordinate interest. Like Chaucer, Boccaccio frames his well-wrought tales in a metaphoric [context](#). The trip to the shrine at Canterbury provides a meaningful backdrop against which Chaucer [juxtaposes](#) his earthy and pious characters. The frame of the *Decameron* (from the Greek *deka*, 10, and *hēmera*, day) has relevance as well: during the height of the [Black Plague](#) in [Florence, Italy](#), 10 people meet and agree to amuse and divert each other by telling 10 stories each. Behind every story, in effect, is the inescapable presence of the [Black Death](#). The *Decameron*, likely written between 1349 and 1353, is fashioned out of a variety of sources, including fabliaux, exempla, and short romances.

Spreading popularity

Immediately popular, the *Decameron* produced imitations nearly everywhere in [western Europe](#). In Italy alone, there appeared at least 50 writers of [novelle](#) (as short narratives were called) after Boccaccio.

Learning from the success and artistry of Boccaccio and, to a lesser degree, his contemporary [Franco Sacchetti](#), Italian writers for three [centuries](#) kept the Western world supplied with short

narratives. Sacchetti was no mere imitator of Boccaccio. More of a frank and unadorned realist, he wrote—or planned to write—300 stories (200 of the *Trecentonovelle* [“300 Short Stories”] are extant) dealing in a rather [anecdotal](#) way with ordinary Florentine life. Two other well-known narrative writers of the 14th century, Giovanni Fiorentino and Giovanni Sercambi, freely acknowledged their imitation of Boccaccio. In the 15th century Masuccio Salernitano’s collection of 50 stories, *Innovellino* (1475), attracted much attention. Though verbosity often substitutes for eloquence in Masuccio’s stories, they are witty and lively tales of lovers and clerics.

With Masuccio the popularity of short stories was just beginning to spread. Almost every Italian in the 16th century, it has been suggested, tried his hand at *novelle*. [Matteo Bandello](#), the most influential and [prolific](#) writer, attempted nearly everything from brief histories and anecdotes to short romances, but he was most interested in tales of deception. Various other kinds of stories appeared. [Agnolo Firenzuolo](#)’s popular *Ragionamentidiamore* (“The Reasoning of Love”) is characterized by a graceful style unique in tales of ribaldry; Anton Francesco Doni included several tales of surprise and [irony](#) in his [miscellany](#), *I marmi* (“The Marbles”); and [Gianfrancesco Straparola](#) experimented with common folktales and with [dialects](#) in his collection, *Le piacevolinotti* (“The Pleasant Nights”). In the early 17th century, [Giambattista Basile](#) attempted to infuse stock situations (often of the fairy-tale type, such as that of [Puss in Boots](#)) with realistic details. The result was often remarkable—a tale of hags or princes with very real motives and feelings. Perhaps it is the amusing and diverting nature of Basile’s collection of 50 stories that has reminded readers of Boccaccio. Or, it may be his use of a frame similar to that in the *Decameron*. Whatever the reason, Basile’s *Cunto de li cunti* (1634; *The Story of Stories*) is traditionally linked with Boccaccio and referred to as *The Pentamerone* (“The Five Days”). Basile’s similarities to Boccaccio suggest that in the 300 years between them the short story may have gained repute and circulation, but its basic shape and effect hardly changed.

This pattern was repeated in [France](#), though the [impetus](#) provided by Boccaccio was not felt until the 15th century. A collection of 100 racy anecdotes, *Les Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles*, “The Hundred New Short Stories” (c. 1460), outwardly resembles the *Decameron*. [Margaret of Angoulême](#)’s *Heptaméron* (1558–59; “The Seven Days”), an unfinished collection of 72 amorous tales, admits a similar indebtedness.

In the early 17th century Béroalde de Verville placed his own Rabelaisian tales within a banquet frame in a collection called *Le Moyen de parvenir*, “The Way of Succeeding” (c. 1610). Showing great narrative skill, Béroalde’s stories are still very much in the tradition of Boccaccio; as a collection of framed stories, their main intent is to amuse and divert the reader.

As the most influential nation in Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries, [Spain](#) contributed to the proliferation of short prose fiction. Especially noteworthy are: [Don Juan Manuel](#)’s collection of lively exempla *Libro de los enxiemplos del conde Lucanor et de Patronio* (1328–35), which antedates the *Decameron*; the anonymous story “The Abencerraje,” which was interpolated into a pastoral novel of 1559; and, most importantly, [Miguel de Cervantes](#)’ experimental *Novelasejemplares* (1613; “Exemplary Novels”). Cervantes’ short fictions vary in style and seriousness, but their single concern is clear: to explore the nature of man’s secular existence. This focus was somewhat new for short fiction, heretofore either didactic or escapist.

Despite the presence of these and other popular collections, short narrative in Spain was eventually overshadowed by a new form that began to emerge in the 16th century—the novel. Like the earlier Romans, the Spanish writers of the early Renaissance often incorporated short story material as episodes in a larger whole.

Decline of short fiction

The 17th and 18th centuries mark the temporary decline of short fiction in the West. The causes of this phenomenon are many: the emergence of the [novel](#); the failure of the Boccaccio tradition to produce in three centuries much more than variations or imitations of older, well-worn material; and a renaissance fascination with [drama](#) and [poetry](#), the superior forms of classical antiquity. Another cause for the disappearance of major works of short fiction is suggested by the growing preference for [journalistic](#) sketches. The increasing awareness of other lands and the growing interest in social conditions (accommodated by a publication boom) produced a [plethora](#) of descriptive and biographical sketches. Although these journalistic elements later were incorporated in the fictional short story, for the time being fact held sway over the imagination. Travel books, criminal biographies, social description, sermons, and [essays](#) occupied the market. Only occasionally did a serious story find its way into print, and then it was usually a production of an established writer like [Voltaire](#) or [Joseph Addison](#).

Perhaps the decline is clearest in [England](#), where the short story had its least secure foothold. It took little to obscure the faint tradition established in the 16th and 17th centuries by the popular jestbooks, by the *Palace of Pleasure* (an anthology of stories, mostly European), and by the few rough stories written by Englishmen (e.g., [Barnabe Rich](#)'s *Farewell to Military Profession*, 1581).

During the Middle Ages short fiction had become primarily an amusing and diverting medium. The Renaissance and Enlightenment, however, made different demands of the form. The awakening concern with secular issues called for a new attention to actual conditions. Simply, the diverting stories were no longer relevant or viable. At first only the journalists and pamphleteers responded to the new demand. Short fiction disappeared, in effect, because it did not respond. When it did shake off its escapist trappings in the 19th century, it reappeared as the “modern short story.” This was a new stage in the evolution of short fiction, one in which the short form undertook a new seriousness and gained a new vitality and respect.

Emergence of the modern short story

The 19th century

The modern short story emerged almost simultaneously in [Germany](#), the United States, France, and Russia. In Germany there had been relatively little difference between the stories of the late 18th century and those in the older tradition of Boccaccio. In 1795 [Goethe](#) contributed a set of stories to [Friedrich Schiller](#)'s [journal](#), *Die Horen*, that were obviously created with the *Decameron* in mind. Significantly, Goethe did not call them “short stories” (*Novellen*) although the term was available to him. Rather, he thought of them as “entertainments” for German

travelers (*Unterhaltungendeutscher Ausgewanderten*). [Friedrich Schlegel](#)'s early discussion of the short narrative form, appearing soon after Goethe's "entertainments," also focused on Boccaccio (*Nachrichten von den poetischen Werken des G. Boccaccio*, 1801).

But a new type of short fiction was near at hand—a type that accepted some of the realistic properties of popular journalism. In 1827, 32 years after publishing his own "entertainments," Goethe commented on the difference between the newly emergent story and the older kind. "What is a short story," he asked, "but an event which, though unheard of, has occurred? Many a work which passes in Germany under the title 'short story' is not a short story at all, but merely a tale or what else you would like to call it." Two influential critics, [Christoph Wieland](#) and [Friedrich Schleiermacher](#), also argued that a short story properly concerned itself with events that actually happened or could happen. A short story, for them, had to be realistic.

Perhaps sensitive to this qualification, [Heinrich von Kleist](#) and [E.T.A. Hoffmann](#) called their short works on fabulous themes "tales" (*Erzählungen*). Somewhat like Poe, Kleist created an expression of human problems, partly [metaphysical](#) and partly psychological, by dramatizing humankind's confrontations with a fantastic, chaotic world. Hoffmann's intriguing tales of exotic places and of supernatural phenomena were very likely his most influential. Another important writer, [Ludwig Tieck](#), explicitly rejected realism as the definitive element in a short story. As he noted in his preface to the 1829 collection of his works and as he demonstrated in his stories, Tieck [envisioned](#) the short story as primarily a matter of intensity and ironic inversion. A story did not have to be realistic in any outward sense, he claimed, so long as the chain of consequences was "entirely in keeping with character and circumstances." By allowing the writer to pursue an inner, and perhaps bizarre, reality and order, Tieck and the others kept the modern story open to nonjournalistic techniques.

In the [United States](#), the short story, as in [Germany](#), evolved in two strains. On the one hand there appeared the realistic story that sought objectively to deal with seemingly real places, events, or persons. The [regionalist](#) stories of the second half of the 19th century (including those by [George W. Cable](#), [Bret Harte](#), [Sarah Orne Jewett](#)) are of this kind. On the other hand, there developed the impressionist story, a tale shaped and given meaning by the [consciousness](#) and psychological attitudes of the narrator. Predicated upon this element of subjectivity, these stories seem less objective and are less realistic in the outward sense. Of this sort are Poe's tales in which the [hallucinations](#) of a central character or narrator provide the details and facts of the story. Like the narrators in "[The Tell-Tale Heart](#)" (1843) and "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845), the narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) so distorts and transforms what he sees that the reader cannot hope to look objectively at the scene. Looking through an intermediary's eyes, the reader can see only the narrator's impressions of the scene.

Some writers contributed to the development of both types of story. [Washington Irving](#) wrote several realistic sketches (*The Sketch Book*, 1819–20; *The Alhambra*, 1832) in which he carefully recorded appearances and actions. Irving also wrote stories in which the details were taken not from [ostensible](#) reality but from within a character's mind. Much of the substance of "The Stout Gentleman" (1821), for example, is reshaped and recharged by the narrator's fertile imagination; "[Rip Van Winkle](#)" (1819) draws upon the symbolic surreality of Rip's dreams.

The short prose of [Nathaniel Hawthorne](#) illustrates that neither type of modern story, however, has [exclusive](#) rights to the use of symbol. On a few occasions, as in [“My Kinsman, Major Molineux”](#) (1832), Hawthorne’s stories are about symbolic events as they are viewed subjectively by the central character. Hawthorne’s greater gift, however, was for creating scenes, persons, and events that strike the reader as being actual historical facts and also as being rich in symbolic import. [“Endicott and the Red Cross”](#) (1837) may seem little more than a photographic sketch of a tableau out of history (the 17th-century Puritan leader cuts the red cross of [St. George](#) out of the colonial flag, the first act of rebellion against England), but the details are symbols of an underground of conflicting values and [ideologies](#).



Britannica Classic: Nathaniel Hawthorne's “Dr. Heidegger's Experiment”“Dr. Heidegger's Experiment” deals with two of Hawthorne's favourite themes: the consequences of tampering with nature and the rejection of conventional morality. This 1969 dramatization of the tale is a production of Encyclopædia Britannica Educational Corporation. *Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*

The “impressionist” story

Several American writers, from Poe to Henry James, were interested in the “impressionist” story that focuses on the impressions registered by events on the characters’ minds, rather than the objective reality of the events themselves. In [Herman Melville](#)’s [“Bartleby the Scrivener”](#) (1856) the narrator is a man who unintentionally reveals his own [moral](#) weaknesses through his telling of the story of Bartleby. [Mark Twain](#)’s tales of animals ([“The Celebrated Jumping Frog,”](#) 1865; [“The Story of Old Ram,”](#) 1872; [“Baker’s Blue Jay Yarn,”](#) 1879), all impressionist stories, distort ostensible reality in a way that reflects on the men who are speaking. [Ambrose Bierce](#)’s famous [“An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”](#) (1891) is another example of this type of story in which the reader sees a mind at work—distorting, fabricating, and fantasizing—rather than an objective picture of actuality. In contrast, [William Dean Howells](#) usually sought an objectifying [aesthetic distance](#). Though Howells was as interested in human psychology and behaviour as any of the impressionist writers, he did not want his details filtered through a biased, and thus distorting, narrator. Impressionism, he felt, gave license for falsifications; in the hands of many writers of his day, it did in fact result in sentimental romanticizing.

But in other hands the impressionist technique could subtly [delineate](#) human responses. [Henry James](#) was such a writer. Throughout his prefaces to the New York edition of his works, the use of an interpreting “central intelligence” is constantly emphasized. “Again and again, on review,” James observes, “the shorter things in especial that I have gathered into [the Edition] have ranged themselves not as my own impersonal account of the affair in hand, but as my account of somebody’s impression of it.” This use of a central intelligence, who is the “impersonal [author’s](#) concrete deputy or delegate” in the story, allows James all the advantages of impressionism and, simultaneously, the freedom and mobility common to stories narrated by a disembodied voice.

Respect for the story

In at least one way, 19th-century America resembled 16th-century Italy: there was an abundance of second- and third-rate short stories. And, yet, respect for the form grew substantially, and most of the great artists of the century were actively participating in its development. The seriousness with which many writers and readers regarded the short story is perhaps most clearly evident in the amount and kind of critical attention it received. James, Howells, Harte, Twain, Melville, and Hawthorne all discussed it as an art form, usually offering valuable insights, though sometimes shedding more light on their own work than on the art as a whole.

But the foremost American critic of the short story was [Edgar Allan Poe](#). Himself a creator of influential impressionist techniques, Poe believed that the definitive characteristic of the short story was its unity of effect. “A skillful literary artist has constructed a tale,” Poe wrote in his review of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales* in 1842.

If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the out-bringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole [composition](#) there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design.

Poe’s polemic primarily concerns craftsmanship and artistic integrity; it hardly prescribes limits on subject matter or dictates technique. As such, Poe’s thesis leaves the story form open to experimentation and to growth while it demands that the form show evidence of artistic diligence and seriousness.

French writers

The new respect for the short story was also evident in France, as Henry James observed, “when [in 1844 [Prosper](#)] [Mérimée](#), with his handful of little stories, was elected to the French Academy.” As illustrated by “Columbia” (1841) or “[Carmen](#)” (1845), which gained additional fame as [an opera](#), Mérimée’s stories are masterpieces of detached and dry observation, though the subject matter itself is often emotionally charged. Nineteenth-century France produced short stories as various as 19th-century America—although the impressionist tale was generally less common in France. (It is as if, not having an outstanding impressionist storyteller themselves, the French

adopted Poe, who was being ignored by the critics in his own country.) The two major French impressionist writers were [Charles Nodier](#), who experimented with symbolic fantasies, and [Gérard de Nerval](#), whose collection *Les Filles du feu* (1854; “Daughters of Fire”) grew out of recollections of his childhood. Artists primarily known for their work in other forms also attempted the short story—novelists like [Honoré de Balzac](#) and [Gustave Flaubert](#) and poets like [Alfred de Vigny](#) and [Théophile Gautier](#).

One of the most interesting writers of 19th-century France is [Alphonse Daudet](#), whose stories reflect the spectrum of interest and techniques of the entire century. His earliest and most popular stories (*Lettres de mon moulin*, 1866; “Letters from My Mill”) create a romantic, picturesque fantasy; his stories of the [Franco-Prussian War](#) (*Les Contes du Lundi*, 1873; “Monday Tales”) are more objectively realistic, and the sociological concern of his last works betrays his increasing interest in naturalistic [determinism](#).

The greatest French storywriter, by far, is [Guy de Maupassant](#), a master of the objective short story. Basically, Maupassant’s stories are anecdotes that capture a revealing moment in the lives of middle class citizens. This crucial moment is typically recounted in a well-plotted design, though perhaps in some stories like [“Boule de suif”](#) (1880; “Ball of Tallow”) and [“The Necklace”](#) (1881) the plot is too contrived, the reversing irony too neat, and the [artifice](#) too apparent. In other stories, like “The House of Madame Tellier” (1881), Maupassant’s easy and fluid prose captures the innocence and the corruption of [human behaviour](#).

Russian writers

During the first two decades of the 19th century in Russia, fable writing became a fad. By all accounts the most widely read fabulist was [Ivan Krylov](#) whose stories borrowed heavily from Aesop, [La Fontaine](#), and various Germanic sources. If Krylov’s tales made short prose popular in Russia, the stories of the revered poet [Aleksandr Pushkin](#) gained serious attention for the form. Somewhat like Mérimée in France (who was one of the first to translate Pushkin into French), Pushkin [cultivated](#) a detached, rather classical style for his stories of emotional conflicts ([“The Queen of Spades,”](#) 1834). Also very popular and respected was [Mikhail Lermontov](#)’s “novel,” *A Hero of Our Time* (1840), which actually consists of five stories that are more or less related.

But it is [Nikolay Gogol](#) who stands at the headwaters of the Russian short story; [Fyodor Dostoyevsky](#) noted that all Russian short story writers “emerged from Gogol’s overcoat,” a punning [allusion](#) to the master’s best known story. In a manner all his own, Gogol was developing impressionist techniques in Russia simultaneously with Poe in America. Gogol published his *Arabesques* (1835) five years before Poe collected some of his tales under a similar title. Like those of Poe, Gogol’s tales of hallucination, confusing reality and dream, are among his best stories (“Nevsky Prospect” and [“Diary of a Madman,”](#) both 1835). The single most influential story in the first half of the 19th century in Russia was undoubtedly Gogol’s [“The Overcoat”](#) (1842). Blending elements of realism (natural details from the characters’ daily lives) with elements of fantasy (the central character returns as a ghost), Gogol’s story seems to anticipate both the impressionism of Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* (1864) and the realism of Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886).

[Ivan Turgenev](#) appears, at first glance, [antithetical](#) to Gogol. In *A Sportsman's Sketches* (1852) Turgenev's simple use of language, his calm pace, and his restraint clearly [differentiate](#) him from Gogol. But like Gogol, Turgenev was more interested in capturing qualities of people and places than in building elaborate plots. A remaining difference between the two Russians, however, tends to make Turgenev more acceptable to present-day readers: Turgenev studiously avoided anything artificial. Though he may have brought into his realistic scenes a tale of a ghost ("Bezhin Meadow," 1852), he did not attempt to bring in a ghost (as Gogol had done in "The Overcoat"). In effect, Turgenev's [allegiance](#) was wholly to detached observation.

Developing some of the interests of Gogol, [Fyodor Dostoyevsky](#) experimented with the impressionist story. The early story "White Nights" (1848), for example, is a "Tale of Love from the Reminiscence of a Dreamer" as the subtitle states; the title of one of his last stories, "The Dream of the Ridiculous Man" (1877), also echoes Poe and Gogol. Though sharing Dostoyevsky's interest in human motives, [Leo Tolstoy](#) used vastly different techniques. He usually sought psychological [veracity](#) through a more detached and, presumably, objective narrator (*The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 1886; "The Kreutzer Sonata," 1891). Perhaps somewhat perplexed by Tolstoy's nonimpressionist means of capturing and [delineating](#) psychological impressions, [Henry James](#) pronounced Tolstoy the masterhand of the disconnection of method from matter.



Britannica Classic: Fyodor Dostoyevsky's "The Crocodile" This dramatization of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's short story "The Crocodile" tells the story of a young Russian man who, having been swallowed alive by a crocodile, finds himself forced to continue life from inside the animal's belly. This video was produced in 1973 by Encyclopædia Britannica Educational Corporation. *Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*

The Russian master of the objective story was [Anton Chekhov](#). No other storywriter so consistently as Chekhov turned out first-rate works. Though often compared to [Maupassant](#), Chekhov is much less interested in constructing a well-plotted story; nothing much actually happens in Chekhov's stories, though much is revealed about his characters and the quality of their lives. While Maupassant focuses on event, Chekhov keeps his eye on character. Stories like "The Grasshopper" (1892), "The Darling" (1898), and "In the Ravine" (1900)—to name only three—all reveal Chekhov's perception, his compassion, and his subtle humour and irony. One

critic says of Chekhov that he is no moralist—he simply says “you live badly, ladies and gentlemen,” but his smile has the [indulgence](#) of a very wise man.

The 20th century

In the first half of the 20th century the appeal of the short story continued to grow. Literally hundreds of writers—including, as it seems, nearly every major dramatist, poet, and novelist—published thousands of excellent stories. [William Faulkner](#) suggested that writers often try their hand at [poetry](#), find it too difficult, go on to the next most demanding form, the short story, fail at that, and only then settle for the [novel](#). In the 20th century Germany, France, [Russia](#), and the U.S. lost what had once appeared to be their [exclusive](#) domination of the form. Innovative and commanding writers emerged in places that had previously exerted little influence on the genre: [Sicily](#), for example, produced [Luigi Pirandello](#); [Prague](#), [Franz Kafka](#); [Japan](#), [Akutagawa Ryūnosuke](#); [Argentina](#), [Jorge Luis Borges](#). Literary journals with international circulation, such as [Ford Madox Ford](#)'s *Transatlantic Review*, *Scribner's Magazine*, and Harriet Weaver's *Egoist*, provided a steady and prime exposure for young writers.

As the familiarity with it increased, the short story form itself became more varied and complex. The fundamental means of structuring a story underwent a significant change. The overwhelming or unique event that usually informed the 19th-century story fell out of favour with the storywriter of the early 20th century, who grew more interested in subtle actions and unspectacular events. [Sherwood Anderson](#), one of the most influential U.S. writers of the early 20th century, observed that the common belief in his day was that stories had to be built around a [plot](#), a notion that, in Anderson's opinion, appeared to poison all storytelling. His own aim was to achieve form, not plot, although form was more [elusive](#) and difficult. The record of the short story in the 20th century is dominated by this increased sensitivity to—and experimentation with—form. Although the popular writers of the century (like [O. Henry](#) in the U.S. and [Paul Morand](#) in France) may have continued to structure stories according to plot, the greater artists turned elsewhere for structure, frequently eliciting the response from cursory readers that “nothing *happens* in these stories.” Narratives like [Ernest Hemingway](#)'s “[A Clean, Well-Lighted Place](#)” (1933) may seem to have no structure at all, so little physical action develops; but stories of this kind are actually structured around a psychological, rather than physical, conflict. In several of Hemingway's stories (as in many by [D.H. Lawrence](#), [Katherine Mansfield](#), and others), physical action and event are unimportant except insofar as the actions reveal the psychological underpinnings of the story. Stories came to be structured, also, in accordance with an underlying [archetypal](#) model: the specific plot and characters are important insofar as they [allude](#) to a traditional plot or figure, or to patterns that have recurred with wide [implications](#) in the history of mankind. [Katherine Anne Porter](#)'s “[Flowering Judas](#)” (1930), for example, echoes and ironically inverts the traditional Christian [legend](#). Still other stories are formed by means of motif, usually a thematic repetition of an image or detail that represents the dominant idea of the story. “[The Dead](#),” the final story in [James Joyce](#)'s *Dubliners* (1914), builds from a casual mention of death and snow early in the story to a culminating paragraph that links them in a profound vision. Seldom, of course, is the specific structure of one story appropriate for a different story. Faulkner,

for example, used the traditional pattern of the knightly quest (in an [ironic](#) way) for his story “Was,” but for “Barn Burning” he relied on a psychologically [organic form](#) to reveal the story of young Sarty Snopes.

No single form provided the 20th-century writer with the answer to structural problems. As the primary structuring agent, spectacular and suspenseful action was rather universally rejected around midcentury since motion pictures and television could present it much more vividly. As the periodicals that had supplied escapist stories to mass audiences declined, the short story became the favoured form of a smaller but intellectually more demanding readership. [Borges](#), for example, attracted an international following with his [Ficciones](#), stories that involved the reader in dazzling displays of erudition and imagination, unlike anything previously encountered in the [genre](#). Similarly, the American [Donald Barthelme](#)'s [composition](#) consisted of bits and pieces of, e.g., television commercials, political speeches, literary [allusions](#), eavesdropped conversations, graphic symbols, [dialogue](#) from Hollywood movies—all interspersed with his own original prose in a manner that defied easy comprehension and yet compelled the full attention of the reader. The short story also lent itself to the [rhetoric](#) of student protest in the 1960s and was found in a bewildering variety of mixed-media forms in the “underground” press that publicized this life style throughout the world. In his deep concern with such a fundamental matter as form, the 20th-century writer unwittingly affirmed the maturation and popularity of the [genre](#); only a secure and valued (not to mention flexible) genre could withstand and, moreover, encourage such experimentation.



Britannica Classic: “Story into Film: Clark's ‘The Portable Phonograph’ ” Using the example of Encyclopaedia Britannica Educational Corporation's 1977 dramatization of Walter van Tilburg Clark's “The Portable Phonograph,” director John Barnes discusses the problems of translating a short story into film and explains what it means to be faithful to the original. *Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*

[Arlen J. Hansen](#) The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica

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