Chapter IV

4 The Short Story: A Popular Genre

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The Short Story: A Popular Genre

4.1 A Collocation of Definitions

Over the last one hundred and fifty years the short story has gained popularity in the literature of several countries. Although short story is the most widely read of all the genres in the modern times, yet little critical attention is given to the short story. The short story gained literary decorum in the year 1933 when the Old English Dictionary supplement of 1933 gave currency to the term short story, defining it as a particular kind of literary product. This provided a formal admittance to the short story into the vocabulary of English readers. Edgar Allan Poe, the American stalwart devoted much energy in the theoretical discussion of this form and brought out some illuminating essays yet, short story needs further development to rise to popularity.

With the rise in magazine publication there is a noticeable rise in use of short stories as entertainment yet, the use of short story to encourage mannerisms, mimicry, stereotypes, gimmickry and the like have made critics reluctant to adopt short story seriously as a self-sufficient, substantial genre. Howard Nimerov very satirically comments on the existing state of the short story. He says:

Short stories amount for the most part to parlor tricks, party favours with built-in -snappers, gadgets for inducing recognition and reversals: a small pump
serves to build up the pressure, a tiny trigger releases it, there follows a puff and a flash as freedom and necessity combined; finally a celluloid doll drops from the muzzle and descends by parachute to the floor. These things happen, but they happen to no-one in particular. (Critical Approaches to Fiction, 1999).

With the efforts of the Russian Schools in the year 1920, Boris Eichenbaum and Victor Shklovksy this form has gained a definite structure. In this respect the French structuralists like Tzvetan Todorov, and Claude Bremond are experimentalists in no less way.

4.2 Evolution of Short Story

The rise of short story did not find much favourable circumstances in writing. E.M Foster did not find the formal properties of short stories as suitable vehicle for entertainment. Herbert Gold in Kenyon Review says, "The short story teller must have a story to tell, not merely some sweet prose to take out for a walk". Gerald Prince and Claude Bremond exploring the nature of the short story believed that a short story must have an event as a structural unit with temporal movement as its essential characteristics. The subject matter of the short story is another contemplative area. All stories can not be the substance of the short story. Alfred G. Engstrom observes:

Legends of demons, saints, gods and the like and tales of
outright wizardry seldom have a claim to be considered short stories. They do not focus, as a rule, on human affairs and at any rate are not primarily intended as fictions. (*The Short Story: Sense and Structure*, 112).

Therefore, the short story necessarily must convey a “full human dimension” with artistry. It is important to emphasize that it must have an episodic structure and a credulous tomb. The length of the short story is another matter of debate. *Ian Reid* in his book, *The Short Story* says:

> What range of sizes does the term cover? How much contraction or protraction is allowable? Presumably, the lower limit comes down in theory to a mere sentence, of the short exemplified earlier, though in practice it is hard to imagine how anything under a page or two can offer more than a skinny outline of happenings... or a diminutive gesture towards some narrative possibilities...

(24).

Henry James believes that its appropriate length is “in side the range of between six and eight thousand words”. *Somerset Maugham* in his preface to *Complete Short Stories* believes that the minimum length should be of about one thousand and six hundred words and the longest of about twenty thousand words. Frank Sargeson’s *Collected Stories*
has a few pieces less than even five hundred words and there is one, which runs to about thirty two thousand words. Nevertheless a genre cannot be "arithmetically ..." and it is not possible "to a word count the soul criterion".

The rise of short story is another curiosity. There are a number of examples, which justify their belief that the Old Testament stories are the first short stories available in the history of short fiction, [Joseph (Genesis XXXVII-XLVI), Samson (Judges XII-XVI) and Absalom (Second Samuel XIII-XVII)]. These stories as well as the New Testament narratives are not conceived as literary inventions because it is argued that such stories are strictly governed by a moral and an expressed dialectic purpose where fore are not shaped as contributions to the craft of fiction. If we look beyond the Hebrew scriptures to ancient Egypt for the earlier stories we are reminded of The Story of Sinuhe or The Ship-wrecked Sailor which Egyptian wrote down early in the second B. C. We have records of stories from Greece and Rome like The Satyricon, First Century A.D. and Metamorphosis or The Golden Ass, Second Century A.D. Some verse writing in Greek and Latin were also associated to short fiction attributed to Phaedrus and Babrius in the first century A.D. Milesian Tales of Greece during the first two centuries B.C. named after his author Aristides of Miletus (100 B.C.) exist in fragmentary forms.
This story had been re-told frequently by a number of storytellers; among them were John of Salisbury in the twentieth century, Lafontaine in the seventeenth, Voltaire in the eighteenth and Christopher Fry in the twentieth.

During medieval times some stories belonging to eastern cultures flowed into European literature by a number of routes. Ian Reid gives some substantive information in his book *The Short Story*:

The most indefatigably migratory is the *Panchatantra*. In its original Sanskrit from it dates back at least to the early sixth century A.D.; in a variety of translations it spread through Europe in the Middle Ages; and Thomas North rendered it into English in 1570. From an Italian version of a Latin version of a Hebrew version of an Arabic version of a (lost) Pahlavi [middle Iranian] version of some (lost) Sanskrit version of the original *Panchatantra*.

(18).

Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* and in England William Painter’s *Palace of Pleasure*, Geoffery Fenton’s *Certain Tragical Discourses* and George Petteije’s *A Petite; Palace of Petite; His Pleasure* are the earliest stories in short fiction. Since then spurious attempts were made in the novella or the story. In the eighteenth century some writers toyed with the oriental tale for example: Addison and Steele used it as an appendage
to their essays, The Spectator and Voltaire in Zadig.

4.3 Short Story: Home and Abroad

Short fiction gained some popularity in the romantic age. Germany, France, Russia and America added to the most energetic initiatives and a new face of short story gradually shaped up with innumerable talented creative artists contributing to its form. In Germany, the short story became a highly developed literary form by the first quarter of the nineteenth century. In France, the art of the short story occupied a special niche in the second half of the twentieth century because novels were used to depict urban life where as short story was found much suitable for the portrayal of regional life. Likewise in Russia, Pushkin gave much significance to short fiction and Gogol and Turgenev further supported his attempts. Pushkin’s attempt in Russia did much the same wonder as Maupassant did in France. Pushkin unlike Maupassant featured the aristocratic world but Gogol focused his attention on the ordinary people –“apparent non-entities”. H. E. Bates showering praises on Gogol remarked,” he took the short story some way back to the ‘folk-tale’; and doing so bound it to earth.”

In America, the short story first made its legitimate appearance in the year 1880. Fred Lewis Paltee in his historical survey The Development of the American Short Story points out that the term short story itself used generically to designate independent literary from rather than a
just story that lacks length, dates back to the year 1880's. Washington Irving, author of *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* called this writing 'tales' and the same term was also used by Hawthorne, Melville and Poe.

*Harte's* remark about the evolution of the short story in America speaks about its formative influences:

...crude at first, received a literary polish in the press, but its dominant quality remained. It was concise and condensed, yet suggestive. It was delightfully extravagant, or a miracle of understatement... It gave a new interest to slang.... It was the parent of the American short story. ([The Classic Short Story, 134](#)).

The short story found a ready public only after the year 1830 when eminent writers like Poe and Hawthorne made contributions to periodicals and annuals. Where as the American was propelled by romantic impulse into the realm of short story the British writers made no appreciative contribution to the short fiction. The poor output of short fiction in Britain was primarily due to the popularity of the novel as Urban, Urbane and Bourgeois and the easy availability of the British novels in pirated forms.

**Forms of the Short Story**

In the study of the short story it is essential to know the various
conventions that go to the making of shorter fiction. A historical study points out that the story is in the constant process of growing and there are many traditional currents giving birth to new ones. The blossoming and the further blossoming in terms of richness may also be noticed in the form it has branched and sub-branched itself. Ian Reid names this feature as “tributary forms”. They are six in number, namely-

(1) Sketch
(2) Yarn
(3) Marchen
(4) Parable
&
(5) Fable
(6) Mixed Modes.

(1) Sketch:

Sketch is a story that details the conditions surrounding the protagonists and the foils detailing the interaction between the two. The sketch has a static form for it is primarily descriptive in nature. Here the primary emphasis is put on what something; place, or person is like. Washington Irving is regarded to be its chief exponent and he describes the sketch as:

The play of thought and sentiments and language; the weaving in of characters, yet lightly expressively
delineated; the familiar and faithful exhibition of scenes in common life and the half-concealed vein of humour that is often playing through the novel. (31).

The sketch is commonly character study with a noticeable movement towards a narrative dimension. Examples of stories that are predominantly sketches are Joyce’s *Clay*, Mann’s *The Infant Prodigy* and Mansfield’s *German Pension*.

(2) **Yarn**:

Yarn is a story about events and its primary concern is the live of action. It may have an anecdotal core, develops into a tale with an account of happenings discussed in a romantic wind. It may also be called the tales of *gest* (from Latin gesta, deeds). The Yarn includes *gesta* like adventurous exploits, the ballad, the fairy story, or anecdotes, local legend (German Sage) or joke (Witz) or a tale with a proverb (Spruch) or riddle (Ratsel). Among the innumerable yarhs the Australian is the quite noticeable one and is closely comparable to Chinene P’ing Hua and Russian Skaz. P’ing Hua in the early seventeenth century, characterized by its narrators presence, colloquial idiom, and realistic tone. Comparatively the Skaz is a kind of dramatic monologue, which emphasizes the speech habits of the narrator and this contributes to the effects of what is recounted as well as imparted.
Marchen:

Marchen draws its connection from the wish fulfillment patterns of fairy story, which appeals to the sense of the marvelous.

_J.R.R. Tolkien_ describes fairy stories as:

Fairy-stories are not in normal English usage stories about fairies of elves, but stories about Fairy, that is Fairie, the realm or state in which fairies have their being. Fairie contains many things besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, … and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted…(34).

A ‘fairy story’ is one, which touches on or uses Faerie, whatever its own main purpose may be satire, adventure, mortality, and fantasy. Faerie itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by magic—but it is magic of a peculiar mood and power, at the farthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laboratories, scientific, magician.

The term ‘fairy story’ having become depreciated, the German word ‘Marchen’ is often used in the English instead certain critical lexicun. French and Irish literature abounds in *Marchen* types are conscious artistic adoptions of the genuine folk material as well as anonymous oral tradition. Marchen is at times confused with the myth. Anthropologists from Franz Doas and Ruth Benedict to Claude Levi-
Strauss hold this view that myth and folk-tales share much the same kind of content and there is an interchange of themes and motives, hence no absolute distinction is noticeable between the two categories. 

*Ian Reid* differs from them:

First, their pre-occupations differ markedly—on the one hand religious matters, aristocratic heroism, and so forth; on the other, the familiar day dreams and night mares of ordinary folk. Moreover, whereas myth is manifold and diversiform, the Marchen shapes its material (whether drive from mythology or not) according to a particular kind of limited formal pattern (132).

Russian formalist Vladimir Propp appreciatively demonstrated this pattern in 1928. He discovered after studying the structure of a hundred Russian stories, that although particular elements such as character attributes change from stories to stories, the basic function in the plot are precisely narrowed in confirmative to a regular sequence. Propp's emphasis on the underlying interrelationships of narrative components has encouraged French structuralists like A.J. Greimas, Claude Bermond and Tzventan Todorv to develop his insight into a general theory of fiction.

(4) Parable & Fable:

These are closely connected pre-modern forms of the short
story. Whereas the Fable endows animals, or attends vegetative world with human capabilities, the parable are commonly stories with a normal purpose. John Gardner and Lennis Dunlop in their book The Forms of Fiction draws a line of demarcation between the two.

In general, Aesop's Fable is tough minded and 'instructive'; it is in this respect quite unlike the typical fairy-tale... The form is epigrammatic, extremely economical and absolutely concrete. It has no room for the elaboration of character or setting and originally had no room for a concluding abstraction to explain meaning.... (68).

The typical parable is realistic in its attitudes and moralistic in its purpose, as in the Aesop's Fable; but it need not be cynical or ironic, and its meaning need not be instantly apparent. The characters in a parable are generally human beings, not animals or stones or trees, and certain details in setting and character (both of these are often presented more fully than in the Aesop's Fable) may be symbolic. The fiction of Franz Kafka belongs to this category. Finally all these tributary terms of story telling name a tradition to which a storyteller may easily resort to.

Essential Qualities of the Short Story

During the first two decades of the twentieth century essays on
the short story began to pour in continuously especially in America. A call was raised to recognize the short story as a distinctive genre whose uniqueness rests in three related quality: it offers a single impression to the mind of the reader; this is achieved by concentrating on a crises and it makes the crisis pivotal in a controlled plot. This doctrine became practical only after Edger Allan Poe, the pioneer theorist, made some remarks about it. Poe asserted that the essential quality of 'The Short Prose Tale' was 'Unity of Impression' which he regarded as a product of conscious artistic labour. The author 'first conceived' with deliberate care a certain unique or single effect to write out. V.S. 

Pritchett does not wholly agree with Poe's dictum, he remarks:

The wrong word, a misplaced paragraph, an inadequate phrase or a convenient explanation, start fatal leaks in this kind of writing, which is formally very close to poetry. It must be totally sustained. But Poe's conception of unity, claiming to go further than that, becomes too limited to cover all short stories. (Critical Approaches to Fiction, 202).

**Movement of Crisis**

*Sylvan Barnet* in his book *A Dictionary of Limited Terms* expresses the idea that:

Most frequently a short story writer of the nineteenth or
twentieth century focuses in a single character in a single episode, and rather than tracing his development, reveals him at a particular moment. (208)

Theodore Stroud points out in his essay *A Critical Approach to the Short Story* says that the moment of crisis is the juncture during which the character undergoes some decisive change in attitude or understanding. He further adds:

...Several characters in a story may change incidently but ordinarily only one change as a result on concatenation of stimuli, which constitutes the parts of a story. Sometimes two characters are related as undergoing reciprocal changes; so that for instance the happiness of one requires misery for the other. Sometimes even more: Gorki's "26 and one" is a rare example of a story in which a large group is treated as a single personality undergoing a change... for, ordinarily, recognizing that a change is critical is treatment to discovering the "plot". Only then do we rationally comprehend the emotions vaguely produced as we read the story for the first time. (*What Stories Are*, 91).

It is the extent of revelation of peak of awareness experienced by a character that makes some stories linger in the mind of the
readers. Such personal crisis points bring in an important shift of perspective, which makes the purpose of the story as fully apprehended. Further a change in the character’s mind may even be accounted as a moment of crisis. Although there may not be substantial changes in the world around yet the world does stand change in the consciousness of the character that is pivotal to the story.

Symmetry of Design

*Brander Mathews* in his book *The Philosophy Of The Short Story* declared that ‘symmetry of design’ was a sign qua non in the short story and this quality gives the narrative structure to the short story for without conflict, sequential action and resolution there can be no plot. Similarly Somerset Maugham and others believed that Aristotle’s dictum about the plot—a beginning, a middle and an end—applies axiomatically to the short story as it does to the drama or novel. Insistence or symmetry was first propounded by Poe who believed in its religious exercise in the writing of shorter fiction and believed it to be as one of the most important features of the genre. The modern writers of shorter fiction have two good reasons for discarding symmetry of design for it is impeded recognition of the fact that in many good stories symmetry is not present at all and it gave no opportunity to the critics to talk indiscriminatingly about the structure of stories in which it actually is present. *Robert Creely* in his book
The Old Diggers echoes more or less the same ideas:

Where as the novel is a continuum, of necessity, chapter-to-chapter, the story can escape some of that obligation, and function exactly in terms of whatever emotion best can serve it. The story has no time finally, or it hasn’t here. Its shape, its form can be so thought of as a sphere, an egg of obdurate kind. The only possible reasons for its existence is that it has, in itself, the fact of reality and pressure. There, in short, is its form—no matter how random and broken that will seem. The old assumptions of beginning and the end—that very neat assertions—have fallen away completely in a place where the only actuality is life, the only end (never realized) death, and the only value, what love one can manage (136).

In modern fiction there are stories, which could not have existed if it had a developing poet in a old manner. Samuel F. Pickering writes:

In its end the begging and its beginning is its end; the divisions of the story are inseparable and there is no progression between them. Wright Morris’ Magic confuses the reader by describing a psychological world in which past, present and future are only separated from one another. Other stories such as Tillie Olson’s Raqua I
and Jonathan Strong's *Patients* examine the non-sequential world of the mentally ill. (*The Short Story*, 54-55).

'Statis' is not stagnation, it is regarded as a very common feature of the modern stories for such stories do not convey "an activity"

...the character shows himself unable and unwilling to alter his situation; the movement is of a treadmill sort or suggest continues transit without a foreseeable re-entry into social relationships. This inclusiveness becomes a meaningful principle of structure. (*The Short Story: Sense and Structure*, 233).

Yet plot less narrative have managed to provide what *William James* named as:

An impression like that we often get of people in life; their orbits come out of space and lay themselves for a short time along ours, and then off they whirl again into the unknown, leaving us with more than an impression of their reality and a feeling of baffled curiosity as to the mystery of the beginning and end of their being. (*The Short Story: Sense and Structure*, 105).

### 4.4 Short Story in New Zealand:

Three of the most distinguished contemporary New Zealand writers
like Frank Sargeson, Don Davin and Janet Frame have each continued
to make substantial contributions to the literature of their country. Janet
Frame was impressed by Sargeson's collections and was motivated to
take up writings of short stories. Apart from Katherine Mansfield,
other writers who have achieved some measure of literary fame outside
their country are Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Witi Ihimaera and Patricicia
Grace.
Works Cited


