

## Short Fiction

Modern literary fiction has been dominated by two forms: the novel and the short story. “Fiction” (from the Latin *fictio*, “a shaping, a counterfeiting”) is a name for writing that is at least partially imagined. In historical fiction, a writer draws on factual information to present scenes, events, and characters, but the facts are of secondary importance. Readers should expect a novel or story to create a sense of how people respond to life’s circumstances rather than an authentic chronicle of past events.

Ancient forms of the short story date back to the days of oral storytelling. Most of us are familiar with Aesop’s fables and the parables of Jesus from the New Testament. These brief narratives teach a moral lesson. Usually short enough to be memorized, they tend to be less complicated and closely detailed than a story written for the printed page. Fairy tales such as “Jack and the Beanstalk” and tall tales like those about Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill are set in world of magical possibility where supernatural and fantastic occurrences are commonplace. Fairy and tall tales tend to be more elaborately constructed than fables and parables but they thrive on action rather than on character development.

The written short story emerged in the early nineteenth century and was the last major literary form to develop. The short story did at least three things that changed the way brief fiction was told. First, it condensed the action of the tale—usually into a single situation focused on a single character. All of the dramatic and narrative power of the

story was compressed into exploring that one action—its motivations, unfolding, and effects. The second hallmark of modern short fiction is fully delineated character. Characters are usually imagined people who populate a story. Some works of fiction have characters that are not human, such as in “My Life with the Wave” by Octavio Paz, but even these characters are imbued with human traits.

Finally, the short story used prose in a poetic manner. Sound and rhythm, image and symbol, tone and point of view were carefully crafted to communicate the plot as well as the physical and emotional experience of the story. Edgar Allan Poe, who helped develop the short story, thought of the form as an essentially poetic kind of prose narrative that created a trancelike state of heightened feeling, thought, and sensitivity.

The plot of a short story is the element most readers most remember. Plot is a pattern of actions, events, and situations an author uses to tell a story. Through plot, writers create a series of emotional responses in the reader: suspense, humor, sadness, excitement, even terror. A successful short story combines plot with strong characters and poetic language to challenge, delight and enchant its readers.

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