

ANALYSING THE SHORT STORY

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The Short Story – Genre conventions:

- The short story is a type of fiction which above all is characterised by its limited length (surprise!) This means that in the short story every detail is designed to carry the utmost significance – in short, every detail is important.

The most typical genre conventions of the short story are consequences of its limited length:

'In medias res' beginning:

The term 'in medias res' is latin and means: 'in the middle of things'. Because of the brevity of the short story, the author usually eliminates as much detailed background information on time, place characters etc. as possible, and we, the readers, are thrown right into a situation without any ideas of what has happened before.

A limited number of characters.

Limited character description:

Normally, the author leaves it up to the reader to form his or her impression of the characters in a short story. In opposition to the lengthier novel, for example, we seldom find detailed character sketches in the short story. Likewise, the author assigns low priority to the character's social background, for example.

Limited description of the setting:

Although the setting ALWAYS is important in prose fiction, we should not expect lengthy and detailed descriptions in the short story.

Often only one plot – and often a simple one:

Very simply put, the term 'plot' refers to the structure and development of a story through various stages towards the end.

The simple plot of the short story could, for example, look like this:

'in medias res' - quickly rising action – climax - falling action - end situation

A guide to step-by-step analysis and interpretation

Rule of thumb::

Ask the usual 'wh'-questions: Who says what to whom when , how and why? – Asking such questions involves asking:

- What is the story about?
- Which point of view is the story told from?
- Who are the characters?
- When does the story take place?
- Where does the story take place?
- How? (involves analysis, see below)
- Why? (involves interpretation – author's attitude, see below)

Analysis:

Composition and development of the plot:

- How is the text organised and the action arranged? (remember this is the author's deliberate choice).
- Divide the story into sections and give each section a headline. This will help you to see the development of the story more clearly.
- Is there a climax?
- If so, how does the author build up to it
- And where is it?
- If not, is there an anti-climax? (a build-up to a climax which is never realised)
- Which EFFECT does the presence or absence of the climax have?

The setting:

- Where does the story take place?
- How is the setting described – which words are used and in how much detail?
- Are there changes of place during the story?
- EFFECT?

The time:

- When does the story take place?

- What is the time span of the story? (how long a period of time does it cover)
- What is the time sequence (chronological or with 'jumps' in time)
- EFFECT?

The characters:

- Which characters are introduced?
- How are they described (e.g. age, gender, occupation, social background etc.)
- Which characters are main characters?
- Which are side characters?
- How are they created:
 - How much are we actually *told* by the narrator?
 - How much do we learn from what the character *says and does*?
 - How much do we learn from what the character *thinks*?
 - How much do we learn from what other characters say?
 - Are there any other hints in the text?

Point of View: (P.O.V)

The way a story is told is always affected by the temper of the person through whose eyes it is seen, i.e. through its *point of view*:

- Through whose eyes do we see what is going on in the text?
 - a. Through the narrator's eyes?
 - b. Through one or more characters' eyes?
 - c. Through many different points of view?
- EFFECT?

NB: it is VERY IMPORTANT that you try to spot every change in P.O.V when reading a story, since it is crucial to the interpretation of a text.

Interpretation:

To interpret is to use the results from the analysis in order to decide

- The theme(s) of the story
- the author's attitude
- the author's aim with the text:
 - Does he have a certain message?
 - Is his aim to criticise?
 - Or is he mainly creating an effect? If so, which?

Rule of thumb:

Always remember that the author has written the text, making some choices in order to:

- a. ...achieve a certain **effect**,
- b. ...and perhaps even get a **certain message** through

C. ...and thus **affect** the reader to make him or her wonder, discuss or learn.

Perspectives:

NB: Before you move to this level, it is – of course - a MUST that you have made an analysis and interpretation of the short story!

Here you can – to a CERTAIN extent – move beyond the text and connect it to:

...its context: the time at which it is written and to our context: The time at which you read it.

...the author's background: Knowledge of other texts by the same author.

...other texts (poetry/literature or factual prose) which focus on similar themes/problems.

...social /historical circumstances.

...the text in our context: Its relevance today - Its relevance to you.