

Definition of the Short Story

Characteristics

1. A short story is a piece of prose fiction which can be read at a single sitting.
2. It ought to combine objective matter-of-fact description with poetic atmosphere.
3. It ought to present a unified impression of tone, colour and effect
"unity of effect" (Poe)
4. It mostly shows a decisive moment of life (which can entail a fatal blow).
5. There is often little action, hardly any character development, but we get a snapshot of life (slice-of-life story).
6. Its plot is not very complex (in contrast to the novel), but it creates a unified impression and leaves us with a vivid sensation rather than a number of remembered facts.
7. There is a close connection between the short story and the poem as there is in both a unique union of idea and structure.
8. There is a limited set of characters, one single action and a simple plot (often: exposition, complication, crisis, sad / happy ending).
9. A short story very often has an open / abrupt beginning and an open or surprise ending.
10. A short story is restricted to one setting only (fixed place and time, social surroundings).

It is the reader's task to try to understand the author's view of life as shown in his work.

What should we consider when we judge on a short story?

1. What is the theme / the central idea?

Can we state it in one single sentence (a short story should be rich in its comment on life)?

2. What does the characterisation contribute to the total effect?

What are the main characters?

What does each want (succeed or fail)?

What are their inner motivations, their virtues, their human failings?

3. What does the plot contribute to the total effect?

What is the climax?

What sort of conflict does the main character go through?

Is the main action brought to a logical conclusion?

4. What does the setting contribute to the total effect?

Does the setting increase the credibility of character and action?

Does it contribute to the atmosphere?

5. In what atmosphere does the story take place?

The atmosphere is more a result than a cause.

What is the range of emotions the author deals with?

Is there any irony of situation?

6. Is the story plausible?

Does the story have a logic of its own and state some truth about human existence?

Are there any improbable events or coincidences?

7. Does the style contribute to the final effect?

Does the diction (choice of words) fit the main tone?

Does the author use imagery (similes, metaphors, symbols) and what purpose do they serve?

Does he use certain linguistic means (parallelisms, alliterations...)?

Is the style an indirect means of characterisation?

8. What structural elements are there in the story?

What are the meaningful events (exposition, climax, flashbacks, foreshadowings, dénouement, solution, open ending)?

Who is the narrator?

Through whose eyes does the reader see the action (point of view)?

9. What is the literary background?

Can the story be considered as typical of any literary period (local colour movement, impressionism, realism, expressionism...)?

Would you understand the story better if you knew the author's life and other works?

10. Judgement

Do you like the story?

Why do you like it / Why don't you like it?

Can you point out any details to appreciate its value?

