

# Evolution of short stories in America

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**Abstract:** The present study is an attempt to critically examine the most prominent aspects of the short stories in America. The major development took place in this field post American War of Independence. The way these short stories deal with a variety of topics, various aspects of life such as growing individualism in society. These stories do not present the rosy picture but characters who are physically and psychologically challenged making them the chief protagonists. These short stories offer a rich ground for exploration of motives and behavior of a wide variety of characters.

**Keywords:** Short stories, characters, society, physical, psychological challenges

The short story is one of the oldest forms of literary expression. Its origin can be traced back to primitive campfires when hunters came back in the nights and described their full day deeds with unconscious art and imaginative emphasis. This art found more formal expression in the classical tales of the Old Testament and Apocrypha. In the middle ages it flowered in various pastures. In the past hundred and fifty years this genre has developed much more rapidly in scope and variety than in the preceding centuries. There has been no other form of imaginative writing in the recent times that has discovered so many new possibilities of art, interpretation of life and entertainment.

There have been various reasons for this sudden development of the short story, one of the major ones is the surge in the development of fiction in general. The vast expansion of the reading public and the rise of circulating libraries has caused many minds and pens to grapple with the technique of the short story. E-publishing and e-reading has certainly reduced and curtailed the hurdles of publications. Fiction has discovered in numerous forms and methods all of which have become the equipment of the story teller.

The short story has made rapid growth in its own particular territory. During the eighteenth century it was not a popular form of writing, and in the nineteenth century it was regarded primarily as an abbreviated novel, as something for a novelist to tinker when not engaged in full scale work. It was only at the end of the nineteenth century; however, writers of talent and enterprise began to realize that the short story was quite different from full length novel. It became a distinct literary form and from thence there has been no looking back. The present study is to trace the evolution of short stories in America after it became an independent country.

Edgar Allen Poe in his 'The Philosophy of Composition' lays down a certain limit of length of such composition to the length of a single sitting reading to preserve the totality of effects. This is similar to Aristotle's 'Poetics' where he suggests that a true tragedy should not cover a span of more than 24 hours to keep the totality of effect intact. Poe further goes on to say that a skilful literary artist accommodates his incidents or invents them in such a way so as to produce a single and preconceived effect. According to him a tale or a short story should be effect dominated and not incident dominated.

It has been more than a couple of centuries since Poe laid down his ground rules for modern short story .Many authors have contributed to the evolution of short story with a variety of themes, styles, settings and techniques. Yet most writers have adhered to the basics of Poe and those who have transgressed also have fully justified their imaginative deviation such as "Rip Van Winkle" by Washington Irving where the protagonist sleeps and wakes up after 20 years missing the American Revolution.

In a short story, the author tries his best to present the characters artistically. The author presents them in a struggle or complication which produces a definite outcome or the desired effect. The plot of a short story comprises the struggle which its characters undergo, through various crisis to reach the final outcome. The outcome may be happy or tragic, depending not upon the whim and desire of the author but upon the elements in the situation and nature of the characters in the story. Humor and poetry, narrative excitement and characters, fun, fantasy, satire and philosophy are all the components which go well into the compact and versatile medium of modern short story.

America has contributed greatly to this particular genre of fiction .The American short story of the nineteenth century maintained a characteristically critical attitude towards social realities. Even romantic allegories at times gave way to realistic depiction of the lives and mores of the ordinary people .It did not remain a mere unrealistic fairy tale. The writers adopted a realistic mode of expression using common language and familiar struggles and challenges. This colloquial style opened new vistas for significant and talented writers like Mark Twain and Garland. Sarah Orne Jewett's control of dialects in "The Courting of Sister Wispy" and Hamlin Garland's command of Civil War slang in "The Return of a Private" reflect the truth that could not have been possible within the bounds of literary language. Justice to the versatile theme could only be meted out in the local vocabulary and flavor. The same is true of Mark Twain whose celebrated "Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras Country" may appear to be a simple

piece of Californian folklore, but the cultural conflict between East and West [between Daniel Webster and Andrew Jackson] is very beautifully and artistically raised by Mark Twain. He wrote numerous short stories with a variety of topics ranging from the frontier humor to his travels abroad, to blue jays including frogs and dogs. A large number of his stories illustrate the belief that the most profound truths must be expressed through the observance of the details of that particular time and place.

The themes of the short stories changed with the change of the century. The twentieth century saw a complete change in the scene. The writers increasingly started using the elements of satire, more of grotesque and paradoxical and developed a tendency to ridicule the bombastic. The ability to write symbolic tales convincingly without using symbolic language marks the early stories of Ernest Hemingway. His "Big Two Hearted River" seems to be a personal experience of a fishing trip but it illustrates the essentials of life itself like a true symbolic tale. The protagonist has just returned back from the traumatic experiences of World War 1, and trying to regain his psychological poise by revisiting a familiar landscape which is itself now transformed by the recent events. His persistent themes are loss of innocence and the sad erosions by time.

The work of Sherwood Anderson, especially the sketches of "Winesburg, Ohio; A Group of Tales of Ohio" Small Town Life, is remarkable. They describe the misfits, mutters, crazy rebels, bedroom boarders and life starved Americans. He has drawn his grotesque characters very vividly and realistically. What at first glance seems ugly and unpleasant suddenly turns tragic gaining the reader's sympathy. The grotesque is born of the damage done to the human character by the anomalies of modern civilization. Through his stories he depicts the dark and desperate dealings of the community comprising of isolated people. His stories portray the pre-industrial small town life in America.

The twentieth century American short story focusses more on the individualistic isolation of people. Love in most stories is more of exploitation of one man's feelings by another and hence becomes a source of unhappiness. It seems that the short stories in this period verify the poverty of love. Mostly the happy endings have vanished. A remarkable feature of the twentieth century short story is its unusual presentation of material. Dialogue has become very important component which imparts the stage effect seeking resemblance to a short play designed to be observed by the reader rather than just being read.

Satire has also found its prominence in the short stories. It is the major contradiction between material progress and the moral and spiritual impoverishment of man. Fantasy has also become a favorite element in modern short stories and has inevitably inspired much whimsical and undisciplined writing.

Many of Fitzgerald's short stories such as "The Rich Boy", "Winter Dreams", "Babylon Revisited" express his feelings for social nuance and moral scruple. The perception of wealth and its true meaning in "The Rich Boy" whose protagonist is rich and is named Hunter as he is in the continual pursuit of something worthwhile for himself. He has no value for the wealth and relationship with Paula and even at the end he is searching for more. In the "Babylon Revisited" does not forgive her husband for taking her sister away and does not allow any relationship with his daughter in order to punish him. Most of his characters are extremely selfish.

The element of grotesque entered more commonly in the short stories. Life itself with its great contradictions, the gap between dream and reality, imagination and daily life, appearance and essence has steered the American short story towards an ironic grotesque depiction of reality. Therefore loneliness, alienation, a violent opposition to outside intrusion and a frantic search for the ideal harmonious life are deep rooted in their discrepancy between dream and reality. A close study of the story writers suggests the remarkable diversity in the manner and moods but the true predominant character of these stories is individuality.

This short fiction in America has seen greater variety and experimentation than in any earlier period since 1930. To some of the twentieth century writers' locality gained importance and their region became the canvas for exploring the human nature. Writers such as Faulkner, Rawlings, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor convincingly treated and celebrated the lower strata of society.

William Faulkner's uniqueness lies in his regionalism. His themes explore a broad expanse of Southern life moving around certain characters and family. His expression of man's position in the modern world. The complex narrative structures reflect our complex lives, racism, war, mental illness. It seems he has lived the characters and situations of his stories. They raise many social issues. There is a conflict between conscience and the duty towards one's family, generation gaps, the disparity between the rich and the poor, hatred between the blacks and whites and much more in his stories.

The stories of Catherine Anne Porter penetrate deep inside the human mind dealing with dark themes which includes betrayal and unforgiving human nature. The complexity of character delineation in her stories is such that could easily call for the canvas of full length novel. Caroline Gordon was another remarkable writer. At a very young age she was able to bag two literary awards, Guggenheim Fellowship and O'Henry Award. She depicts her concern for order and tradition revealing at the same time her intellectual ties and finding meaning in rituals rather than discarding them.

Flannery O'Connor is one of the very significant writer of her time i.e. World War II. Her short stories are concerned with the complex experiences of growing up and growing older and then the ensuing conflicts. She deals with psychological analysis of her characters and also unanswered questions about the meaning of life. They deal with the deformation and complete destruction of

emotional bonds and the fatality of egotistic success. Her stories are peopled by lonely characters either very old or young. They do not have happy endings and the laughter in them is often painful.

America gained independence in the year 1783, until then it was a British Colony. Until this period it has nothing to claim as its own. The authors who were writing before this period were basically Englishmen and the literature was colonial as they thought and wrote such. After the American Revolution and the War of 1812, the literature that was produced was actually native. 19<sup>th</sup> Century America was a growing country with many adventurous and pioneer souls wandering for new opportunities and brighter future. People were constantly moving from one town to another in search of their livelihood, they had no interest in thick books or serialized novels. They were unsure whether they would be able to read the next part so most preferable was the shorter form. The short story writers created a much more fantastic form which the reader could enjoy and finish in one single sitting so that the totality of effect could be maintained and the newspapers had space to print them. The short story saw a phenomenal growth in the twentieth century and it is continuing till date.

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