

Edgar Allan Poe on the Short Story

Poe was one of the first writers and critics to focus on the short story as a unique genre. In 1842 *Graham's Magazine* published several of his reviews of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*. Here are several excerpts:

We have always regarded the *Tale* (using this word in its popular acceptance) as affording the best prose opportunity for display of the highest talent. It has peculiar advantages which the novel does not admit. It is, of course, a far finer field than the essay. It has even points of superiority over the poem.



We allude to the short prose narrative requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal. The ordinary novel is objectionable, from its length . . . As it cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from *totality*. Worldly interests intervening during the pauses of perusal, modify, annul, or counteract, in a greater or less degree, the impressions of the book. But simple cessation in reading would, of itself, be sufficient to destroy the true unity. In the brief tale, however, the author is enabled to carry out the fullness of his intention, be it what it may. During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control. There are no external or extrinsic influences—resulting from weariness or interruption.

A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed; and this is an end unattainable by the novel. Undue brevity is just as exceptionable here as in the poem; but undue length is yet more to be avoided.

We have said that the tale has a point of superiority even over the poem. In fact, while the *rhythm* of this latter is an essential aid in the development of the poem's highest idea—the idea of the Beautiful—the artificialities of this rhythm are an inseparable bar to the development of all points of thought or expression which have their basis in *Truth*. But Truth is often, and in very great degree, the aim of the tale.¹

In 1845 *Aristidean* published Poe's none-too-modest review of his own stories. Here are some of his comments.

The style of Mr. Poe is clear and forcible. There is often a minuteness of detail; but on examination it will always be found that this minuteness was necessary to the development of the plot, the effect, or the incidents. His style may be called, strictly, an earnest one. And this earnestness is one of its greatest charms. A writer must have the fullest belief in his statements, or must simulate that belief perfectly, to produce an absorbing interest in the mind of his reader. That power of simulation can only be possessed by a man of high genius. . . .

¹ Edgar Allan Poe, *Essays and Reviews* (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 568–573, *passim*.

The evident and most prominent aim of Mr. Poe is originality, either of idea, or the combination of ideas. He appears to think it a crime to write unless he has something novel to write about, or some novel way of writing about an old thing. He rejects every word not having a tendency to develop the effect. Most writers get their subjects first, and write to develop it. The first inquiry of Mr. Poe is for a novel effect—then for a subject, that is, a new arrangement of circumstance, or a new application of tone, by which the effect shall be developed. And he evidently holds whatever tends to the furtherance of the effect to be legitimate material. Thus it is that he has produced works of the most motable character, and elevated the mere 'tale,' in this country, over the larger 'novel'—conventionally so termed.²

In 1846 Poe published his famous essay "The Philosophy of Composition" in *Graham's Magazine*. This passage appears near the beginning.

Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its *denouement* before anything be attempted with the pen. It is only with the *denouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention.

There is a radical error, I think, in the usual mode of constructing a story. Either history affords a thesis—or one is suggested by an incident of the day—or, at best, the author sets himself to work in the combination of striking events to form merely the basis of his narrative—designing, generally, to fill in with description, dialogue, or authorial comment, whatever crevices of fact, or action, may, from page to page, render themselves apparent.

I prefer commencing with the consideration of an *effect*. Keeping originality *always* in view—for he is false to himself who ventures to dispense with so obvious and so easily attainable a source of interest—I say to myself, in the first place, 'Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, which one shall I, on the present occasion, select?'³

1. How does Poe define the short story?
2. What does he see as the special benefit(s) of the genre?
3. What does he mean by the phrase "a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out"?
4. How does he distinguish poetry's highest goal from fiction's?
5. In reviewing his own work, what characteristics does Poe suggest for a good short story?
6. What does "The Philosophy of Composition" suggest about the art and craft of short fiction?

²Ibid., 873.

³Ibid., 13.

"A Story That Is Not Too Long"

Contemporary short story writers, critics, and anthologists often comment on the nature of the form. Martha Foley, long-time editor of the *Best American Short Stories* anthologies, comments:

The businesslike *Short Story Index* defines it as "a story of more than two average-sized pages." The more literary *American Heritage Dictionary* states it is "a short prose fiction aiming at unity of characterization, theme, and effect." Robert Penn Warren says "It is a story that is not too long." Then a novel might be defined as a story that is not too short? Henry James said a story could be an anecdote or a picture and "I prefer the picture." Edward J. O'Brien thought the modern short story grew out of the essay. Others think its genesis was in tales told by prehistoric people around cave fires. A Supreme Court Justice, struggling with a pornography case decision, exclaimed, "I can't define obscenity but I know it when I see it!" So it is, I believe, with a short story. You know a short story when you read it!⁴

Critic and anthologist Peter S. Prescott writes:

Perhaps the short story's principal appeal is its throwaway effect: a few dabs with a brush, then wash your hands and throw away your materials; you won't be using them again. The short story will always be with us because it's so useful; it's the only means of conveyance for certain themes, situations, and, yes, tones of voice that would prove unendurable if we had to live with them much longer. . . .

It's partly for this reason—the quickly approaching limit to our tolerance of a theme or a condition—that so many short stories are concerned with loneliness and her stepchildren, desperation and madness. . . .

By reason of its brevity, the short story can develop an intensity of style, as well as of vision, that would be difficult to sustain for the length of a novel.⁵

Clifton Fadiman describes his criteria in selecting short stories:

Reading or rereading many hundreds of stories, I asked myself two main questions. First, how good is this of its kind? Second, regardless of kind, at how deep a level of feeling and insight is the writer operating? What it boils down to is that in my judgement each story had to be both interesting and of high literary merit.⁶

Finally, contemporary writer Toni Cade Bambara describes her experience with the genre:

I am currently working on a novel, though my druthers as writer, reader, and teacher is the short story. The short story makes a modest appeal for attention, slips up on your blind spot and wrassles you to the mat before you know what's grabbed you. That appeals to my temperament. But of course it is not too shrewd to be exclusively a short story writer when the publishing industry, book reviewers, critics, and teachers of literature are all geared up for the novel. . . .

The short story is a piece of work. The novel is a way of life. . . . It will be a pleasure to get back to the shorts; they allow me to share. I much prefer to haul around story collections . . . and then select from the "menu" something that suits the moment and is all of a piece.⁷

⁴ Martha Foley, Introduction to *200 Years of Great American Short Stories*, ed. Martha Foley (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975), 3.

⁵ Peter S. Prescott, Introduction to *The Norton Book of American Short Stories*, ed. Peter S. Prescott (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 14–15.

⁶ Clifton Fadiman, Foreword to *The World of the Short Story: A Twentieth Century Collection*, ed. Clifton Fadiman (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986), xi.

⁷ Toni Cade Bambara, "What It Is I Think I'm Doing Anyway," in *The Writer on Her Work: Contemporary Women Writers Reflect on Their Art and Situation*, ed. Janet Sternburg (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1980), 164–167.