UNIT STRUCTURE

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8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to :

- discuss the short story as a literary form,
- describe the basic characteristics of a short story,
- explain the elements of a short story,
- discuss some important short story writers of the world, India and Assam,
- learn how to write a short story,
- value the unit in its totality.

8.2 INTRODUCTION

Everyone loves a story. You must have listened to your grandmother's stories on cold wintry nights and felt happy or sad on hearing it. A story sometimes takes you to a world other than the one you are living in and you are left fascinated by it. A short story is perhaps easier to read and less time- consuming than a novel which takes a long time

to finish reading. But a short story also is perhaps harder to write than a novel as it has to create its effect in a limited number of words. Like miniature paintings, they are tightly wound and every detail counts.

This unit introduces you to the short story as a literary form and also elaborates on the different characteristics which a good short story needs to have. You may also have noticed that stories differ in their atmosphere; for example you may have love stories, ghost stories, detective stories etc., each of which creates the mood characteristic to it. You may also notice that the characters in a short story do not develop in the course of the narrative, because there is little scope for it. In this unit, you will also be introduced to some famous short story writers of the literary world and some of the very famous and beautiful short stories which they have written. Some of these stories have remained imprinted on the minds of the readers for their sheer brilliance of expression and sensitive human touch. You will also be given some tips on how to write a short story; however, you must not forget that writing a creative piece is an art which is exclusive to the writer.

Let us now have a look at the evolution of the short story and what goes to make a good short story.

8.3 SHORT STORY AS A LITERARY FORM

Before we go on to the short story, let us first understand what is meant by fiction. Fiction is basically a narrative of some event or events. A narrative, as we all know, tells a story by presenting the events in a logical manner. What is important is that a work of fiction is a narrative which has its genesis in the mind and imagination of the author, not in history or fact. However you should also remember that there are some works of fiction which may focus on real people and actual events, but the interaction among the characters and the way the plot unfolds, are totally the author's invention. From a prehistoric oral tradition to a very postmodern present, fiction has traversed a long way. The short story is just such a form of narrative fiction. Like the novel, the short story evolved from various sources of narrative from all over the world; hence it is difficult to determine where exactly it originated.

Let us now see what H. G. Wells has to say about a short story: "A short story is or should be a simple thing; aims at producing one single vivid effect; it has to seize the attention at the outset, and never relaxing, gathers it together more and more until the climax is reached. The limits of the human capacity to attend closely, therefore, set a limit to it; it must explode and finish before interruption occurs or, fatigue sets in." As I have already mentioned earlier, a short story has to make an impression upon the mind of the reader within a short period of time, say an hour or two. In fact someone once said that a short story is something which can be "read in an hour and remembered for a lifetime." The aim of all good literature, as you might know, is to delight its readers and expand their understanding of men and manners. The short story is not different in this aspect. Today it is a very popular form of study and its popularity owes itself to various causes. In this age of rush and restlessness, a lot of factors draw a reader to the sweet pleasure of reading a short story. A long novel like *Gone With the Wind*, *War and Peace*, *The Grapes of Wrath* cannot provide immediate pleasure to the modern reader and so hardly suits his time and temper (this is the age of instant coffee, instant messaging, instant food after all!). Here, a short story amply serves the purpose of the modern man in providing pleasure. The famous novelist, Isabel Allende says: "Novels are, for me, adding up details……Short stories are more difficult- they have to be perfect, complete in themselves."

However, this is not to say that a short story is a rival or a substitute for a novel. Each has its own place and importance in the history of literary genres. It would also be gravely wrong to brand a short story as a brief novel. The short story also cannot compete with the novel in the sense that it cannot exhibit life in all its variety and complexity for it requires a broader canvas. As a matter of fact, the short story is very difficult to classify as it is one of the most elusive forms, and it is also very difficult to define it within a particular limit. Reading a short story can be a more profound and moving experience than reading a novel because of the sheer intensity of a short story. If you ask "How long should a short story be?" it will be impossible to construct it within



H. G. Wells — British novelist, author of novels such as *The Time Machine, The War of the Worlds* etc.



Gone With the Wind — novel by Margaret Mitchell

War and Peace — novel by Leo Tolstoy

The Grapes of Wrath — novel by John Steinbeck

a said limit. There are 'long' short stories and 'very short' short stories. Somerset Maugham commented in his preface to his *Complete Short Stories* that "the shortest item runs to about 1600 words and the longest to about 20,000 words." In fact most short stories fall somewhere between these two extremes.

Let us now look back on the beginnings of the short story. Some argue that the forefathers of the short story are the myths and legends of yore, but although the short story as a literary form existed in the remote past in some crude form, its popularity and prominence is of recent origin. You have probably heard of the Parables of Jesus Christ. These parables were narrated by Jesus Christ to his disciples to teach them moral lessons. The simple and candid way in which these stories are told stirs the heart of the listeners as well as the readers. The fable, which is a short narrative in prose or verse and which points to a moral is also in a sense a short story. You must have heard about Aesop's fables like 'The Lion and the Mouse', 'The Hare and the Tortoise', 'The Old Man and the Bundle of Sticks' etc. These are all specimens of early short stories. Classical Indian literature too has a plethora of fables which can be deemed short stories too. The characters are mostly animals through which certain moral values are personified. For example, we have 'The Tiger and the Fox', The Elephant and the Fox', 'The Old Tiger and the Traveller' etc. We have the Buddhist *Jataka* tales, the *Panchantantra* and the *Boddhisatva* tales. The narratives about the brothers Cain and Abel, the Prodigal son, Ruth, Jezebel, and Judith in the Bible are all short stories. The famous *Canterbury Tales* of Chaucer are also short stories even though they are written in verse. But it is only in the modern times that the short story has been able to garner huge significance and recognition. You will be surprised to know that a number of the most famous short stories in the world have been written in the last one hundred fifty years or so. Some short stories which have become part of common lore are the detective stories of Arthur Conan Doyle, the mystery with a touch of the Gothic stories of Edgar Allan Poe, the moving stories of human relationships of O. Henry, the pleasant stories of Guy de Maupassant and the veritable



Parable **—** story with a moral

Plethora **—** over abundance

Fable **—** story with animal characters and a moral in the end

treasure of our very own Rabindranath Tagore's short stories. Let us now discuss the important characteristics which a good short story needs to have.

LET US KNOW



You will be interested to know that the short story has many 'relatives' in different parts of the world. The French have a variation of the short story called *conte* and *nouvelle*, the Spanish call it *novela*, the Italians, *novella*, the Germans, *Nouvelle* and *Kurzgeschichte* and the Russians term it *skaz*.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 1



1. 'The Lion and the Mouse' is a parable. (True/ False.)
2. Can we say that the short story is a short novel?

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3. Most short stories are neither too short nor too long. (True/ False).

8.4 BASIC CHARACTERISTICS

We have already learnt that a short story is not easy to define precisely. Poe has described the short story as a prose narrative, "requiring from half an hour to one or two hours for its perusal." William Henry Hudson says that a short story is something which "can be easily read at a single sitting." Whereas the novel is an extended piece of narrative fiction, the short story is limited in length and scope. But this is not to say that brevity is the only characteristic of a short story.

A short story is basically a narrative which deals with certain incidents and which involves certain characters around which the story revolves.

It should create a single impression and effect upon the reader's mind. Generally a short story deals with incidents covering a short period of time. But in stories like Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle*, Maupassant's *La Parure*, even *The Bet* by Anton Chekhov (which we will deal with later), the narrative covers a long period of time. However, the concentration of interest and the singleness of impression must be maintained in order to classify the short story as a really good one.

In keeping with the oral story telling tradition, a short story tells a story. So, story telling forms an important aspect of a short story. A story should have a plot which is constituted of events and actions and which achieves certain artistic and emotional effects. And if the plot is stirring, then the story without doubt will be beautiful. A good plot is also commonly said to have unity of action. This means that the parts of the story must be so well connected that any restructuring will upset the story as a whole.

But let us not forget that a good plot in a short story depends upon the characters who act out the incidents. Plot and character are interdependent concepts. Henry James, the novelist, once commented: "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?" However, a short story cannot have a huge cast of characters as in a novel and also the characters' traits cannot be delineated in a detailed manner. As a result, the short story begins close to or at the height of the action, and develops only one character at length. Also, there are some epiphanic moments which the character experiences, i.e. a moment of illumination in which something hidden or not understood becomes suddenly very clear. But you must understand that the greatest short story writers have beautifully portrayed characters that are truly remarkable and unforgettable. Some characters like Rahamat in Rabindranath Tagore's *Kabuliwallah*, Old Behrman in O. Henry's *The Last Leaf*, the giant in Oscar Wilde's *The Selfish Giant* are to be cherished forever.



In tandem — together

The plot, characters and the atmosphere must work in tandem for a short story to be effective. The short story also must have a beginning,

a middle and an end, i.e. it should have a proper structural design. The world's best known short stories adhere to this dictum and delight us with their descriptions of men and manners.

LET US KNOW



We have learnt that a short story needs to have a good plot. But do you know that the plot and the story are distinguishable from each other? A story is only a summary of the chronology of the events. When we tell a story, we say first something happens, then something else and so on. But it is only when we specify how one event is related to the other, and how all the events are ordered and organized so as to achieve their particular effects, that the synopsis begins to be adequate to the plot.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 2



1. How is character important in a short story?

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2. How does Hudson define a short story?

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3. What is the difference between plot and story?

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8.5 ELEMENTS OF A SHORT STORY

We have already talked about the basic characteristics of a short story. The elements, which constitute a good story, will enable us to understand and appreciate the story better. There may be different elements like plot, character, atmosphere, point of view, style, tone, and language, symbol and allegory, and theme. Of these, plot, character, setting or atmosphere, and point of view are of paramount importance. Let us now look at these constituents one by one and see how we can write a good short story.

8.5.1 Plot

It is a generally accepted fact that stories are read by almost everyone in this world; if not, people at least listen to a story. So, what is the first thing you look for in a short story? Obviously, we look for the plot, i.e. the way in which the events in the story relate to one another, and how they relate to the story as a whole. You have already learnt the way in which plot and story are distinguishable from each other. We also look for conflicts which may occur in the story, and we are eager to know the way in which these conflicts are developed and resolved. Sometimes we may notice that the story is told in flashback or sometimes it may look forward to events in a possible future culmination.

LET US KNOW



Let us try to understand what Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren had to say about the plot in ***Understanding Fiction***:- "The beginning of an action always presents us with a situation in which there is some element of instability, some conflict; in the middle of an action there is a period of readjustment of forces in the process of seeking a new kind of stability; in the end of an action, some point of stability is reached, the forces that have been brought into play have been resolved."

Whatever the case may be, plots are necessary for a story to achieve a desired effect, whether it is tragic, comic, satiric, melodramatic etc. Plot is shaped by the way in which the events of the story are connected causally, by the way in which the characters interact with each other and also by the juxtaposition of the events. Conflicts in a story may be of various types and readers' interest in the story is heightened by the author's ability to present these conflicts in a nuanced manner. The conflict is generally a clash between the protagonist and the antagonist. The antagonist may be a person or a situation; in some stories, the conflict may occur in the characters' minds. This mainly happens in the stream of consciousness type of fiction, e.g. the stories of William Faulkner and James Joyce. The plot again has various stages, and you will understand it better if you read what has been quoted above from ***Understanding Fiction***. The plot moves from an exposition through a series of developments to a climax, then finally, it leads to a denouement. The exposition sets the tone for the story, by introducing a character, or setting a scene, or perhaps even through a hint of the events to be expected. Ismat Chughtai's *Housewife* begins thus: "The day Mirza's new maid ambled into his house, there was a sensation in the neighbourhood." We are left expecting what will happen next. Or sample this: "Midnight was a large, black, three- year- old tomcat of haughty demeanour and aristocratic traits. His countenance bore the unmistakable stamp of a Great Thinker." (from *Midnight* by Wendy Fernandes). We are amused and surprised to learn that Midnight is a cat.

As the plot progresses, the events build up to a climax, which is the point of greatest tension in the story, the scene which proves to be a decisive element. The denoument or resolution draws the actions to a close, and ties up all the loose ends. In some stories however, there is no resolution provided, and is left open ended. This leads the readers to decide how the conflicts could have ended. Sometimes, the resolution is achieved with the help of *deus ex machina*, or 'god from a machine' in which a hard- pressed author thinks up implausible or extraneous events to resolve the plot.



Denouement —

it may be the event or events following the climax of a plot or the unraveling of a plot's complications at the end of a story or play.

Deus ex machina —

('God out of the machine')

In Greek drama, a god was lowered onto the stage by a mechane so that he can untangle the plot or get the hero out of difficulties. This phrase is applied to an unanticipated intervener who resolves a difficult situation in a story or in any literary genre.

Generally, the events in a story are presented in a logical and chronological manner. But modern short stories often subvert the order of events; the story may begin in the middle, or even at the end, and then move back to the beginning to reconstruct the incidents. Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* is a good example. As already mentioned, stories may be told in flashback, which may provide vital information to the readers which will help one to understand the story better. Some stories also involve foreshadowing, i.e. the introduction of events, situations or characters early on in the story which hint at things to come. This encourages and entices readers to get more involved in the story. Experimental stories always arouse interest in the readers as they try to decipher or interpret the meaning in their own ways.

Plots may be simple or complex, but its success depends inevitably on the way it is rendered by the author. If you want to write a short story, let us look at some of the important points which you should keep in mind:

- You should relate what happens in the story.
- How you begin the beginning is very important. The characters need to be introduced along with the feel of the setting. It is also necessary to divulge the conflicts, if any, which might possibly take place in the story.
- The plot and the sub- plot (s) must be handled in a careful manner, so that they do not overlap or disrupt the narration.
- You should be able to make it clear to your readers about who is the protagonist and who or what serves as the antagonist.
- Readers should also be able to identify the crisis in the action and the climax of the story.
- The resolution of the conflict needs to be handled in a manner which will in a way satisfy the readers. You should keep in mind whether the resolution is possible, or satisfying, or open- ended. Even if there is any uncertainty, does it weaken or strengthen the story? Or would some other ending have been more effective?

- The order of events in the story is also of importance; whether they are presented in a chronological manner or whether there are flashbacks, or whether the story goes backwards and forwards in time. The causal connections between the events should be clear and you must be able to explain clearly if some disparity occurs.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 3



1. Who wrote the book ***Understanding Fiction***?

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2. How important is the exposition in a plot?

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3. The story is sometimes resolved by means of *deus ex machina*. What do you mean by this?

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4. *A Rose for Emily* is written by James Joyce. (True/ False).



ACTIVITY

1. Think of a plot, say some event of your own life, and make it the subject of a story.

8.5.2 Character

After reading about plot, let us now look at how the characters play a pivotal role in the story. What is meant by a 'character'? A character is a fictional representation of a person; readers interpret them as possessing certain attitudes, characteristics, moral, intellectual and emotional qualities, mainly with reference to what they say and do. Characterization is the way in which the writers develop their characters and reveal their traits to the readers. Sometimes even the names of some characters mirror their particular traits. Characters can be developed either by *telling* the readers about them, as in the case of stories with third-person narrators, or, first person narrators can tell their readers about themselves or other characters. For example, Mr. Watson in Arthur Conan Doyle's stories reveals aspects about himself, the fact that he is a doctor with a good practice, and also about the idiosyncrasies and brilliant powers of detection of his famous friend, Sherlock Holmes. In other cases, we can also guess Mr. Watson's personality from his actions, even though he tells us nothing about it.

You must have heard about the famous English writer, E. M. Forster, who wrote ***A Passage to India***. His book ***Aspects of the Novel*** (1927) classified characters as being *flat* and *round*. A flat character is one which does not develop much during the course of the story, what you can call a 'stereotypical' character. Sherlock Holmes is a flat character as he is already developed and does not need to bring about much variation in his personality. On the other hand, a round character is a well developed one, who is closely involved in and responsive to the action. Real life and real people are not that perfect. So it cannot be expected that readers will believe in 'too- perfect' characters. Flaws in a character add to its believability. The young banker in Chekhov's *The Bet* is a rounded character for the fact that there is a growth of the mind and outlook of the character. Some flat

characters are *stock characters* in the sense that they are very easily identifiable types; they behave in a predictable manner; so it is not difficult for the reader to recognize them. Round characters, on the other hand, behave very unpredictably, reacting to situations in their own exclusive way. So they are sometimes very difficult to understand. But we need to understand the motivation behind the character's action, so that it is easy for us to believe them. Rosemary Fell in Katherine Mansfield's *A Cup of Tea*, behaves quite unpredictably with the poor girl, Miss Smith because, despite her good intentions, her jealousy is aroused when her husband praises Miss Smith. The tension which develops as readers wait to see how Rosemary will react is what makes the story so interesting.

When writing about character, it will be helpful if you keep in mind the following points:

- Try to make it clear as to who is the protagonist or the antagonist and who are the other major and minor characters.
- Will the story be any different if some of the characters were not there?
- Is the physical appearance of the characters of any importance at all?
- The personalities of the characters also need to be delineated in a lucid manner.
- What will the readers infer from the background and prior experiences of the characters?
- Readers should be able to identify whether the characters are flat or round.
- Do the characters develop through the narrator's comments or through their own actions and dialogue?
- It will be interesting to note whether the readers are sympathetic with the characters or not.

- It will be further interesting to see whether the characters behave in a way that is consistent with how readers expect them to act.

LET US KNOW



Like *flat* and *round* characters, there can also be *dynamic* and *static* characters. Dynamic characters grow and change during the course of the story, reacting to situations in their own way. Static characters however, may face the same situations, but they will remain essentially unchanged, whatever be the conflict of the story.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 4



1. Mr. Watson is a character in the stories by Sherlock Holmes. (True / False).
2. *Aspects of the Novel* is a book by Arthur Conan Doyle. (True / false).
3. What do you mean by 'stock' characters? Give an example of such a character.

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4. What are 'round' characters? Can you name one round character?

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ACTIVITY

1. Read a short story and try to describe the major character / characters in your own words.

8.5.3 Setting

Let us see what N. Scott Momaday has to say about the importance of *setting* in a story in ***Ancestral Voices***: "I think that the sense of place is extremely important to most writers. Certainly it is to me. I identify very strongly with places where I have lived, where I have been, where I have invested some part of my being…….The earth was here before I was. When I came, I simply identified place by living in it or looking at it. One does create place in the same way that the storyteller creates himself, creates his listener. The writer creates a place." The setting of a story helps the writer in creating the texture of his imagined world with its character, locale and environment. It establishes the story's historical, geographical and physical location. In some stories, the setting is almost a character, perhaps influencing the characters' behaviour, as in the stories by Ruskin Bond, where his place of residence Mussorie is a pervasive 'presence'. A conflict between the events of the story and its setting can also add to the interest in the story. For example, if modern inventions are thrust into an old- fashioned village, where residents are still carrying on with age- old methods of living, it is interesting to see how they react to it. This enriches a story.

A particular historical setting can create the appropriate mood for the readers to appreciate the story. If we know that a particular story is set during, say, the French Revolution, we can understand the characters' behaviour, their mannerisms and dress code etc. Sometimes the atmosphere of some stories might almost seem to be anachronistic in today's context, but if the author is able to handle the plot skillfully, the story will be a success. In addition to knowing *when* a work takes place, it is equally important to

know *where* something happens. Gothic stories are set in dungeons, castles with hidden passages and creaking doors which create an atmosphere of supernatural terror and fear. Stories may be set in cities or villages, in advanced countries like the United States or in underdeveloped countries like Kenya. This makes the readers understand why the characters behave in ways which are unfamiliar to us. Sometimes even regional differences within a country may account for differences in plot development and characters' motivation. Also, the size of a city or town is sometimes important. If the town has a small population, the characters' behaviour will be subject to intense scrutiny, like in Ruskin Bond's stories, whereas in a large city, the characters can lose themselves in the crowd.

It is also seen that sometimes stories are set in a fantasy world, say in science fiction stories by H. G. Wells, or in *The Selfish Giant* by Oscar Wilde. Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Miss Katy- did and Miss Cricket* sets the story in the insect world of nature. Such settings enable the writers to experiment with situations and characters without caring much for readers' expectations.

The *time of the day* can also influence a story's mood and development. In detective stories, the time of a murder, for instance, can help unravel the mystery of the murder and the murderer. In Mansfield's *Her First Ball*, a ballroom serves as the setting for a young girl's initiation into the rules and realities of adult society. Weather can also be indicative of a situation in the plot. A storm may indicate danger descending upon the character's life; a sunny day may indicate a prelude to a happy event, etc. The various physical attributes of the setting combine to create a story's atmosphere. A story's atmosphere also influences a character's state of mind, leading them to react in different ways in different settings.

So, what do you think are the functions of atmosphere in a story? First of all, the atmosphere binds the story together and

sets the time- frame. It also provides the background to the story and makes for economy and authenticity. Let us now have a look at some pointers to be kept in mind while writing about the setting:

- Keep in mind whether you have specified the setting or only sketched in the details.
- Is the setting simply a background to the story or is it a pivotal 'character'?
- Are the characters influenced by the setting and has an effect on their behaviour?
- It will be good if you can specify how the setting influences the story's plot and lead the characters to act and react.
- Are the readers able to appreciate the time period in which the story is set, particularly the historical setting?
- How are location and time important to the development of the story?
- The general atmosphere of the story also must give the readers an inkling of the events to happen.
- How significant is the change in the atmosphere as the story progresses?

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 5



1. What are the types of setting generally noticed in a story?

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2. *Her First Ball* is a story by Harriet Beecher Stowe. (True / False).

3. How can weather be an important aspect of the setting?

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4. Mention one function of atmosphere in a story.

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ACTIVITY

1. Read *The Selfish Giant* by Oscar Wilde and write about the setting in your own words.
2. Use your imagination and write a science fiction story set in 2050. Create your own characters and setting.

8.5.4 Point of View

As you know, all stories are narrated by some person or persons. Point of view signifies the way a story is told- the vantage point from which the events are presented. Point of view is extremely important, particularly in detective stories, because the perspective of the narrator affects the plot. Stories are mostly told either in the first- person or the third- person. The second- person narration is a rarely used mode. It should be kept in mind however that even when the writer uses the first- person 'I', the narrator of the story may be completely different from the writer, as writers create narrators to tell their story.

The narrator is sometimes a character who uses the first- person 'I' to tell a story. For example, we have Leo Tolstoy's story *After*

the Dance, in which he narrates a conversation between himself and some of his friends. You should keep in mind that along with narration *of* a story, there is also narration *in* a story. A character may relate his tale, which in turn may consist of other tales. In William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*, the narrator speaks as *we* instead of *I*, thus speaking on behalf of all the residents of the town. The first-person narrator is thus, to a greater or lesser degree, a participant in the story or is the protagonist of the story. *Memories of an Indian Childhood* and *A Candle for St. Jude* by Qurratulain Hyder, in the first- person, are believed to be inspired to a large extent by her own personal experiences. First-person narrators are able to present the events convincingly, and hence readers tend to believe them easily. However, there is a certain limitation in first- person narration, as the narrators cannot relate the story of their own death, or they cannot enter into the minds of the other characters. They may also sometimes distort facts either by mistake, or by being confused. Hence they become *unreliable*. Discerning readers are able to decipher the irony in the disparity between the narrator's interpretation of the events and their own. If you, as readers, are able to discover the discrepancies between the narrator's view of events and your own, you will get an insight into the story, and also learn something about the writer's purpose in writing the story.

Let us now look at third - person narration, which is by far the most common form of narration in stories. In this kind of narration, the narrator is someone who is outside the story, and refers to the characters either by name, or, by "he", "she" or "they". Thus, *The Rocking Horse Winner* by D. H. Lawrence begins: "There was a woman who was beautiful, who started with all the advantages, yet she had no luck. She married for love, and the love turned to dust. She had bonny children, yet she felt they had been thrust upon her, and she could not love them….." Third- person narrators are *omniscient*, in the sense that they can move at will from one character's mind to the other. They

are a privileged lot as they have access to the characters' thoughts, motives and states of consciousness. Third- person narrators can present a more inclusive overview of the happenings in the story than first- person narrators can. Sometimes, the third- person narrators are *intrusive*, who along with reporting the events, also comments on them and sometimes offers personal views on human life. Others are *unintrusive*, i.e. they tell the story from an entirely objective point of view, without commenting on the events, and also allowing the readers to interpret them without any interference. Instances of objective narrators can be found in Hemingway's short stories e.g. *A Clean, Well- Lighted Place*, and *The Killers*.

The second person narration is that in which the story sis told as an address by the narrator to someone he calls as "you". This is not a very common form of narration. The second person may either be a fictional character, or the reader, or even the narrator himself. The story unfolds by shifting between telling the narratee what he/she is doing at present, what he/she has done in the past, or may do in the future.

You must remember that it is not necessary for authors to maintain a single point of view throughout the entire story. Although one point of view is dominant, writers sometimes introduce other points of view to achieve a level of complexity. Let us now go through some of the point that we need to keep in mind while writing about point of view:

- What will the dominant point of view be in the story?
- The readers need to be able to decipher whether the narrator is a character in the story or whether he is a mere witness to the happenings.
- Is there a discrepancy between the narrator's view and the reader's interpretation?
- Can we rely on the narrator?

- If the story is in the third person, is the narrator omniscient? Is he intrusive or objective?
- Readers must be able to decipher whether the point of view fulfills the writer's purpose in writing the story.
- Is there any shifting between the points of view, or is it consistent?
- Is it possible that a different point of view other than the one in the story will change it altogether?

LET US KNOW



Third-person narrators may also have a limited omniscience which focuses on only what a single character experiences. There is no comment on what that character does not see, hear, feel, or think. These narrators are flexible in that they may the readers acquainted with the mind of a particular character, but have none of the first- person narrator's subjectivity or naïveté.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 6



1. How can there be narration of a story and narration in a story?

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2. What are the limitations of first- person narrators?

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3. Third-person narrators are only intrusive. (True/False).
4. *The Killers* is a story by Lawrence. (True/False).

ACTIVITY



1. Write a short story with a first- person point of view. You may include events from your own life to make it interesting.

2. Read a short story by Hemingway and try to understand the narrator's objective point of view.

So far, we have reviewed some of the main elements which are essential while writing a short story. But innovation is the name of the game, and experimentation is always welcome in order to be a successful writer. Let us now have a look at some of the famous short story writers of the world.

8.6 FAMOUS SHORT STORY WRITERS

Let us now have a look at the some of the most famous short story writers of the world who have enthralled readers with their brilliant depiction of the various facets of life. Writers, you may know, are a different breed altogether. They write for various reasons, to portray various emotions. And it goes to their credit that the myriad hues of the complex phenomenon called life comes alive in all its glory in their writings. Stories, as we already know, have been there since time immemorial, in some form or the other. And there have always been storytellers who fictionalized narratives to achieve the desired effects in different contexts.

The world has seen a number of great and also not- so- great story-tellers; some have achieved prominence and acclaim, whereas some others have stayed away from the limelight, but this in no way diminishes their brilliance.

8.6.1 From the world

Edgar Allan Poe is generally regarded as the father of the modern short story, although there has been much debate about this. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that Poe's contribution to the

genre is awesome. He especially excelled in the detective story genre which had elements of the Gothic. Some of his famous stories include *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, *The Purloined Letter*, *The Mystery of Marie Roget*, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Black Cat*, *The Gold Bug*, *The Masque of the Red Death* etc. Besides Poe, the other famous American short story writers include Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain, Herman Melville, Jack London, Henry James and O. Henry. O. Henry is a master of the surprise ending and his stories are characterized by a 'twist in the tale', as can be seen in *The Gift of the Magi* and *The Romance of a Busy Broker*. Alexander Pushkin was among the most prolific of the Russian realistic short story writers. Gogol is another Russian short story writer whose stories about everyday occurrences of life and common people moved the readers. You will be interested to know that Gogol has even featured in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* as the central character is named Gogol Ganguly. *The Overcoat* is one of Gogol's seminal stories. Leo Tolstoy, besides being a novelist, is also noted for his short stories. His story *What Men Live By* is a thoughtful piece of writing. Anton Chekhov had a profound influence on the short story. Guy de Maupassant is the most outstanding of French short story writers. He and Chekhov are generally regarded as the masters of the genre. Honore de Balzac, Alphonse Daudet, and Gustave Flaubert are other notable French short story writers. Among the English short story writers, mention may be made of Thomas Hardy and his *Wessex Tales*, Arthur Conan Doyle and his *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, H. G. Wells and his science fiction stories, D. H. Lawrence wrote some great stories dealing with human relationships. Saki wrote witty, ironic and elegant stories of enduring interest. The Czech writer Franz Kafka wrote weird short stories which also display his skill in handling his pet themes of the plight of individuals in the modern society. The Spanish American authors Luis Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez and the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier also published

short stories which are highly regarded. They use a lot of magic realism in their writing to captivate their readers. The magical realism is crucial in providing the readers with an alternative perception of reality.

8.6.2 From India and Assam

There are Indian short story writers too who have proved themselves as successful practitioners in the genre. Among them are Rabindranath Tagore, Prem Chand, Ismat Chugtai, Ruskin Bond, Shashi Deshpande, Amrita Pritam and Khuswant Singh. And how can we forget R. K. Narayan and his moving yet humorous stories set in the little town of Malgudi, with its varied characters?

Our very own Assamese short story writers like the extremely brilliant Lakshminath Bezbarua, Bhabendranath Saikia, Shilabhadra, Lakshminandan Bora, Saurav Chaliha also demand consideration. Mamoni Raisom Goswami is an intense writer who creates a poignant imagery of the life of the widowed women who live in dire straits.

All these writers create a world which enthrall their readers and also enrich their knowledge of men and manners. More budding writers are making their presence felt in the contemporary literary scenario refreshing narrative style, new and bold themes, and fascinating plots. They have been able to carve a niche for themselves in the domain of creative writing in English, and we can only hope that this trend will continue for us readers to derive some moments of pleasure in life.

LET US KNOW



Khuswant Singh thinks that there is something special about the Indian short story. In his own words: “It (the Indian short story) sticks to the traditional rules of the craft. It is in fact short and not a novella or

an abridged novel. It revolves round one or at the most two or three characters and does not have a long dramatis personae as in novels. It is limited in time and space and does not span decades or spread out in different locales. It also has a well- formulated central theme and does not touch upon several topics or clashes of personalities. It has a distinct beginning, a build- up and usually a dramatic end, frequently an unexpected one which sums up the story. Western short stories tend to be prolix leaving the reader to guess what it is all about. That is why many critics believe that the West has lost the art of writing short stories. In India, on the other hand, the short story is as vibrant as ever."

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 7



1. O. Henry's short stories are characterized by a

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2. Why is Arthur Conan Doyle famous?

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3. Name a few Assamese short story writers.

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4. Write the names of two English short story writers.

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5. D. H. Lawrence is regarded as the father of the modern short story. (True/ False).

ACTIVITY



1. Read a short story by Ruskin Bond and compare it with the short stories prescribed in your course.
2. Read some stories written by Bezbaruah and Dr. Bhaben Saikia and compare them in them in their treatment of Assamese life.
3. Read a short story written by your favourite Assamese/ English short story writer and comment on its unity of action and singleness of impression.

8.7 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt that the short story is one of the most popular forms of literature today. You have seen how the short story differs from the novel and also learnt about the beginnings of the genre to the present day. The characteristics of the short story as well some of its most famous practitioners from around the world and also India and Assam have also been discussed to enhance your knowledge about this popular literary type. The important elements which are essential in writing a short story have been dwelt upon, and four of them, plot, character, setting and point of view have been discussed in a detailed manner. You have also been given some pointers which you should keep in mind while writing a story.

We have therefore seen that the short story has evolved as specific form of literary art like any other form of art, having its own characteristics and its own laws. The genre has been instrumental in providing its readers pleasure and wisdom and all that a good art must offer.



8.8 FURTHER READINGS

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7. Kirszner & Mandell. *Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing*. Fifth Edition. Thomson Wadsworth: Massachusetts, 2004.
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8.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

1. The short story can be “read in an hour and remembered for a lifetime”. Comment on this statement.
2. How did the short story originate? Briefly trace its origins from antiquity to the present day.

3. What are the important characteristics of a short story?
4. How is the beginning, middle and end important in the plot of a story?
5. What are flat and round characters? Give examples.
6. “The writer creates a place.” How, do you think, setting influence a story?
7. How, do you think, points of view realize the author’s purpose in writing a story?
8. Write a short note on some important short story writers and their works.

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