



UNIVERSITE FELIX HOUPHOUËT-BOIGNY DE COTONOU

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UFR : LANGUES, LITTERATURES ET CIVILISATIONS (LLC)

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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FIRST-YEAR CURRICULUM

2022-2023

# LECTURE ON THE SHORT STORY

Course Supplement devised

by

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**Course Objective:** by the end of this course First-Year Learners in the Department of English should be able to discuss the Short Story as a Literary Genre.

**Course Description:** the course aims to

- define the *Short Story*
- chart its key elements
- trace the historical evolution of the *Short Story* as a literary genre
- identify the different types of *Short Stories*
- pinpoint the appealing characteristics of the *Short Story*
- assess learners' understanding of the above through practical text analyses

**Course Overall Timing:** 8 hours

## THE SHORT STORY: THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Compared to novels, short stories often get overlooked as an art form, but these singular works of fiction deserve a closer look. Short stories give readers all the compelling characters, drama, and descriptive language of great fiction, but in a truly compact package.

So, what is the secret behind those potent, carefully written gems? Answers to this pivotal question prompt to define the **short story** and its key elements, and analyze the esthetics that govern it.

### What is a Short Story?

A short story is a work of prose fiction that can be read in one sitting — usually lasting between 20 minutes to 1 hour. There is no maximum length, but the average short story is 1,000 to 7,500 words, with some outliers reaching up to 10,000 or 15,000 words. At around 10 to 25 pages, short stories are much shorter than novels, with only a few approaching *novella* length. A piece of fiction shorter than 1,000 words is considered a “short short story” or “flash fiction,” and anything less than 300 words is rightly called “micro-fiction.”

### The Key Elements of a Short Story

The standard short story shares in the same elements as the long fiction story-telling. These include setting, characters, plot, theme, and language mostly. Yet, these differ in tone and aspects following their variegated types.

- ❖ **Setting:** The **setting** of a short story is often simplified (one time and one place).
- ❖ **Characters:** one or two **main characters** may be introduced without full backstories. In this concise, concentrated format, every word and story detail has to work extra hard!
- ❖ **Plot:** Short stories typically focus on a **single plot** (instead of the multiple subplots, as you might see in novels). Some stories follow a traditional narrative arc, with *exposition* (description) at the beginning, *rising action*, a *climax* (peak moment of conflict or action), and a *resolution* at the end. However, contemporary short fictions are more likely to begin in the middle of the action, drawing readers right into a *dramatic scene*.
- ❖ **Theme:** While short stories of the past often revolved around a **central theme** or moral lesson, today it is common to find stories with *ambiguous* endings. This type

of unresolved story invites open-ended readings and suggests a more complex understanding of reality and human behavior.

- ❖ **Language:** The short story genre is well suited to experimentation in prose writing style and form, but most short story authors still work to create a distinct mood using classic **literary devices** (point of view, imagery, foreshadowing, metaphor, diction/word choice, tone, and sentence structure).

## Historical Background of the Short Story

Short-form storytelling can be traced back to ancient legends, mythology, folklore, and fables found in communities around the world. A few of those stories existed in written form, but many were passed down through oral traditions. By the **14<sup>th</sup> century**, the most well-known stories included ***One Thousand and One Nights*** (Middle Eastern folk tales by multiple authors, later known as ***Arabian Nights***) and ***Canterbury Tales***, by Geoffrey Chaucer.

It wasn't until the early **19<sup>th</sup> century** that short story collections by individual authors appeared more regularly in print. First was the publication of the Brothers ***Grimms' Fairy Tales*** in 1812 (by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm), then came **Edgar Allen Poe's Gothic fiction**, and eventually, the stories by **Anton Chekhov** (1860-1904), who is often credited as a founder of the modern short story.

The popularity of short stories grew along with the surge of **print magazines** and **journals**. Newspaper and magazine editors began publishing *stories as entertainment*, creating a demand for short, plot-driven narratives with mass appeal. By the **early 1900s**, ***The Atlantic Monthly***, ***The New Yorker***, and ***Harper's Magazine*** were paying "good money" for short stories that showed more literary techniques. That golden era of publishing gave rise to the short story as we know it today.

## The Different Types of Short Stories

Short stories come in all kinds of categories: action, adventure, biography, comedy, crime, detective, drama, dystopia, fable, fantasy, history, horror, mystery, philosophy, politics, romance, satire, science fiction, supernatural, thriller, tragedy, and Western. Here are some popular types of short stories, literary styles, and authors associated with them:

- ❖ **Fable:** A tale that provides a moral lesson, often using animals, mythical creatures, forces of nature, or inanimate objects come to life (Brothers Grimm, Aesop).

- ❖ **Flash Fiction:** A story between 5 to 2,000 words that lacks traditional plot structure or character development, and is often characterized by a surprise or twist of fate (Lydia Davis).
- ❖ **Mini Saga:** A type of micro-fiction using exactly 50 words (!) to tell a story.
- ❖ **Vignette:** A descriptive scene or defining moment that does not contain a complete plot or narrative, but reveals an important detail about a character or idea (Sandra Cisneros).
- ❖ **Modernism:** Experimenting with narrative form, style, and chronology (inner monologues, stream of consciousness) to capture the experience of an individual (James Joyce, Virginia Woolf).
- ❖ **Postmodernism:** Using fragmentation, paradox, or unreliable narrators to explore the relationship between the author, reader, and text (Donald Barthelme, Jorge Luis Borges).
- ❖ **Magical Realism:** Combining realistic narrative or setting with elements of surrealism, dreams, or fantasy (Gabriel García Márquez).
- ❖ **Minimalism:** Writing characterized by brevity, straightforward language, and a lack of plot resolutions (Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel).

### Some Notable Short Stories and Authors

1. "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) – Edgar Allan Poe
2. "The Necklace" (1884) – Guy de Maupassant
3. "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) – Charlotte Perkins Gilman
4. "The Story of an Hour" (1894) – Kate Chopin
5. "Gift of the Magi" (1905) – O. Henry
6. "The Dead," "The Dubliners" (1914) – James Joyce
7. "The Garden Party" (1920) – Katherine Mansfield
8. "Hills Like White Elephants" (1927), "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" (1936) – Ernest Hemingway
9. "The Lottery" (1948) – Shirley Jackson
10. "Lamb to the Slaughter" (1953) – Roald Dahl
11. "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" (1955) – Gabriel García Márquez
12. "Sonny's Blues" (1957) – James Baldwin
13. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1953), "Everything That Rises Must Converge" (1961) – Flannery O'Connor

## Some Popular Short Story Collections

1. *The Things They Carried* (1990)– Tim O'Brien
2. *Labyrinths* (1962, 1964, 1970, 1983) – Jorge Luis Borges
3. *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman* (2006) – Haruki Murakami
4. *Nine Stories* (1953) – J.D. Salinger
5. *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981) – Raymond Carver
6. *The Stories of John Cheever* (1978) – John Cheever
7. *Welcome to the Monkey House* (1968) – Kurt Vonnegut
8. *Complete Stories* (1944) – Dorothy Parker
9. *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) – Jhumpa Lahiri
10. *Suddenly a Knock at the Door* (2012) – Etgar Keret\*

## Prominent Contemporary Short Stories and Authors

Popular short stories of recent times which can be as capturing and even more compelling in emotion-rousing as any deftly knitted long stories of novels include:

- ❖ Ray Bradbury's "All Summer In One Day" (1954),
- ❖ Raymond Carver's "Cathedral" (1983),
- ❖ Annie Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain" (1997),
- ❖ Yiyun Li's "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" (2005)
- ❖ Ken Liu's "Paper Menagerie" (2011), winner of Sci-Fi/Fantasy Awards, the Hugo Award, the Nebula and the World Fantasy Award

## African and African-American Short Stories

Inspiring short stories have been written by Africans and African-Americans over time. A non-exhaustive list of famous Black writers and their works have long enriched world literature with different perspectives and feelings. African-American authors write short stories drawing on such themes as racism, racial discrimination, ethnicity, but also on a variety of subjects and topics including those raised by other writers around the world. Best-known African American short stories collections include:

- ❖ *The Best Short Story by Black Writers 1888-1967* (1969), edited by Langston Hughes,
- ❖ *White Rats: Short Stories* (1977) by Gayl Jones,
- ❖ *Talk Like a Man* (2019) by Nisi Shawl,
- ❖ *Children of the Night: The Best Short Stories by Black Writers* (1997), by Gloria Naylor, etc.

African writers also involve in producing sensational air-stirring short stories drawing both on their original oral heritage and modern literary canons. Their themes and

styles accordingly bring newness and diversity to ever-growing multicultural world literatures. Among the many authors and anthologies of African short stories are:

- ❖ *African Short Stories* (1985) edited by Chinua Achebe and Catherine Lynette Innes,
- ❖ *The Heinemann Book of Contemporary African Short Stories* (1992), edited by Chinua Achebe and Catherine Lynette Innes

While short stories by Black South African writers essentially depict the daily life of the oppressed Black and Colored masses in segregated apartheid society, and therefore largely share in themes, tones and feelings with those from African Americans, most short stories produced by Black African writers elsewhere in the continent vary in topics and moods.

**The Appealing Characteristics of the Short Story:** *Intense effect; powerful impression; unity of impression; brevity; combination of events; variety of tones and results; truth; reasoning; popular responses.*

Charles Baudelaire (1857)<sup>1</sup> determines some of the appealing effects of the short story in his critical study of Edgar Allan Poe's works. He writes that:

“[a]mong the literary domains where imagination can obtain the most curious results, can harvest treasures, not the richest, the most precious (those belong to poetry), but the most numerous and the most varied, there is one of which Poe is especially fond; it is the short story. It has the immense advantage over the novel of vast proportions that its **brevity** adds to the **intensity of effect**. This type of reading, which can be accomplished in **one sitting**, leaves in the mind a more **powerful impression** than a broken reading, often interrupted by the worries of business and the cares of social life. The **unity of impression, the totality of effect** is an immense advantage which can give to this type of composition a very special superiority, to such an extent that an extremely short story (which is doubtless a fault) is even better than a an extremely long story. The artist, if he is skillful, will not adapt his thoughts to the incidents but, having conceived deliberately and at leisure an effect to be produced, will invent the incidents, will **combine the events** most suitable to bring about the desired effect. If the first sentence is not written with the idea of preparing this final impression, the work has failed from the start. There must not creep into the entire composition a single word which is not intentional, which does not tend, directly or in directly, to complete the premeditated design.

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<sup>1</sup> Baudelaire, Charles (1857), “New Notes on Edgar Poe” (from the original title « Notes sur Edgar Poe », translated by Lois and Francis Hyslop. *Preface to Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires par Edgar Poe*), in (Ed.) Eric W. Carlson, *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Criticism Since 1829*, USA, The University of Michigan Press, 1966, pp.43-60.

There is one point in which the short story is superior even to the poem. Rhythm is necessary to the development of idea of beauty, which is the greatest and the most noble aim of poetry. Now, the artifices of rhythm are an insurmountable obstacle to the detailed development of thought and impression which has **truth** as its object. For **truth** can often be the goal of the short story, and **reasoning** the best tool for the construction of a perfect short story. That is why this type of composition, which is not as high on the scale as pure poetry, can provide **more varied results, more easily appreciated** by the average reader.” (p.53)

## References

Achebe, Chinua and Catherine Lynette Innes (eds.) (1985), *African Short Stories, Stories by English Authors in Africa*: <https://www.free-ebooks.net/short-stories-classics/Stories-by-English-Authors-in-Africa>

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Bulberk, Laura (2017), *Edgar Allan Poe Short Stories (Gothic Fantasy)*: <http://blog.flametrepublishing.com/fantasy-gothic/gothic-fantasy-edgar-allan-poe-short-stories>

Geoffroy Chaucer (1483), *The Canterbury Tales* (second edition), London: William Caxton.

Hughes, Langston (ed.) (1967), *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers: An anthology from 1899 to the Present*, Boston: Little, Brown.

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Jones, Gayl (1977), *White Rats: Short Stories*, New York: Random House.

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Naylor, Gloria (1997), *Children of the Night: The Best Short Stories by Black Writers, 1967 to the Present*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

Shawl, Nisi (2019), *Talk like a Man*, Chicago: PM Press

“What is a Short Story?” at <sup>1</sup> <https://www.blurb.com/blog/what-is-a-short-story>

# Tutorial Sessions

## SUGGESTED AXES FOR TUTORIAL CLASSES

- ❖ **Content-Based and Form-Based Identification and discussion of Short Stories**

### Tasks for Sessions:

- ❖ **Select and download from Google PDF short stories of various types and ask learners to identify them in accordance with the specific characteristics listed in “The Different Types of Short Stories” (pp.4-5) in the Lecture.**
- ❖ **Discuss the appealing features of short Stories against those of other fiction genres basing on the ones identified by Charles Baudelaire (p.7-8), and more.**

## SUGGESTED TEXTS

### Examples of Mini Sagas

1- “A Tale of Two Pirates” (2013), by Marsha Frisch

Aaaaargh, says I; and Aaaaargh says he. That’s pirate courtin’ as it’s meant to be. Settin’ sail for the seven seas; bound for gold not mutiny. With compass and treasure map, he steers the ship; I sit in his lap. Not even a blunderbuss could split the two of us.

2- “Voilà with a V” (2011) by Alex Mayo

Leaving the door opened as I finished using the microwave, I gave a flourish of my hand and said “walla” to the old man approaching the microwave. “Excuse me, what was that you said?” he asked. “Walla,” I repeated. “That’s Voilà,” he corrected me. “Voilà with a V.” Who knew?

3- “War And Pieces” by Mary Ann Slater (1999 First Prize Winner)

“Edge pieces first,” he decrees. All others are rounded up, segregated. “Blues into the blue pile, browns into the brown. Do not mix them.” My moves are restricted (a tree here, a cloud there), while he attacks the castle. I smuggle a piece into my pocket: the revolution has begun.

## Examples of Vignette Short Stories

- 1- Explore one of Ernest Hemingway's vignettes excerpted from his Short Story Collection *In Our Time* (1925). The writer uses that vignette to *describe* the death of a bullfighter named Maera.

'Maera lay still, his head on his arms, his face in the sand. He felt warm and sticky from the bleeding. Each time he felt the horn coming. Sometimes the bull only bumped him with his head. Once the horn went all the way through him and he felt it go into the sand ... Maera felt everything getting larger and larger and then smaller and smaller. Then it got larger and larger and larger and then smaller and smaller. Then everything commenced to run faster and faster as when they speed up a cinematograph film. Then he was dead.'

### 2- "House on Mango Street" (1984), By Sandra Cisneros

"Then Uncle Nacho is pulling and pulling my arm and it doesn't matter how new the dress Mama bought is because my feet are ugly until my uncle who is a liar says, "You are the prettiest girl here, will you dance ... My uncle and me bow and he walks me back in my thick shoes to [my mother](#) who is proud to be my mother. All [night](#) the boy who is a man watches me dance. He watched me dance."

## Notes

### Definition of Vignette

Vignette is a small impressionistic scene, an illustration, a descriptive passage, a short essay, a fiction or nonfiction work focusing on one particular moment; or giving an impression about an idea, character, setting, mood, aspect, or object. Vignette is neither a plot nor a full narrative description, but a carefully crafted verbal sketch that might be part of some larger work, or a complete description in itself.

### The Function of Vignette

We often find vignettes in creative writing, as it provides description to achieve an artistic effect. However, we also see its usage in [prose](#) and poetry. Writers use this device to explore a character, and describe the setting of a scene. Vignettes give deeper understanding of texts, as writers densely pack them with [imagery](#) and [symbolism](#). Besides, it increases writers' language proficiency, as they use their language to its

fullest by employing imagery to set a certain color and mood. Hence, the nature of vignettes is evocative and puts an impact on the senses of readers.

### **Examples of Flash Story**

Attributed to Ernest Hemingway is the following flash story. Discuss its features against those of the types above-mentioned.

1- “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.”

Joyce Carol Oates writes a four-word flash fiction in titled “Widow’s First Year”:

2- “I kept Myself Alive”.